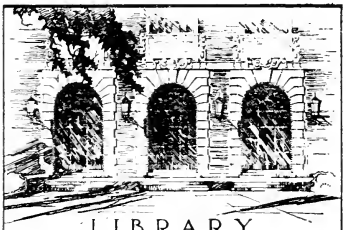

# A BURGLARY:

OR,

# UNCONSCIOUS INFLUENCE.

BY

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### CHAPTER I.

#### THE CRŒSUS-HOGGS.

VERY momentous and unexpected were the results following indirectly from that call of Lady Elise's in Belgrave Square, which hindered the attempt Ethel was just about to make to sound her cousin upon the subject of Mr Sylvester. But before setting forth the object of Lady Elise's visit, it is neces-

sary to introduce the reader to her new friends, the millionaire Crœsus-Hoggs.

The Crœsus-Hogg family was five in number, and consisted of the father and mother; two daughters, named respectively Guinevere and Victoria; and one son, named Guelph. Whatever charges might be brought against these people, over-refinement was certainly never likely to be one of them, as their appearance and manners would effectually give it the lie. Indeed, some persons thought that their standard of breeding was hardly near enough to that which generally prevails amongst ladies and gentlemen to allow of their being admitted to the society which esteems itself to belong to the upper ten. But then it was only a narrow-minded and prejudiced minority who took that view, and in the eyes of the majority of the world, the enormous wealth possessed by the Crœsus-Hoggs was sufficient to atone, almost, if not altogether, for any deficien-

cies of birth or breeding on their part. Never was seen such an establishment as theirs ; such troops of gorgeously apparelled servants ; such sumptuous liveries ; such magnificent horses and carriages ; such splendid furniture ; such superb flowers ; such valuable plate ; such pictures ; such statues ; in short, such a lavish display of wealth in every direction ! It was notorious throughout all London that no visitor of any kind—be he tradesman, servant, messenger, or individual, however insignificant—could spend a minute within the Crœsus-Hogg doors without discovering that luxury pervaded every corner of the house, and that something gratifying to the five senses of humanity was to be met with at every turn. And how enviable must be the condition of people whose lives were passed wholly amongst such delights, and who could enjoy them to the very fullest extent.

Whatever good thing money could buy, that the Crœsus-Hoggs would have, cost

what it might; and throughout their establishment they would tolerate nothing less than as near an approach to perfection as it was possible to have. For instance, the artist who presided in the kitchen was a real genius, a cook such as is but rarely to be met with in this fallen world of ours. He was a Frenchman, rejoicing in the name of Gaston Leblanc, an enthusiast for his profession, which he regarded with a chivalrous love and veneration as being the only thing in the world deserving of unswerving constancy. Religion, morality, women, amusements—all these did very well to take up or leave alone for a while, according to the fancy of the moment. But not so his art; that possessed his heart too entirely for him to be guilty of fickleness towards it for so much as a moment; and to do anything that could bring it into disrepute seemed to him a heinous crime. He maintained that, inasmuch as every kind of food had its own natural and pecu-

liar flavour, therefore those who destroyed that flavour—whether by over-saucing, careless cooking, unskilful mixing, or any other way—were little short of murderers, in that they deprived the food of the individuality which constituted it's life, and whereby it was to be distinguished from all other foods.

The well-known saying to the effect that God sends meat and the devil sends cooks, was one day rashly alluded to in his hearing. His horror and indignation at the idea of the mere existence of such a heresy were so great that he nearly had a fit. When he had somewhat recovered from the first shock, he began seriously to consider the propriety of challenging to mortal combat the daring person who had been so wanting in delicacy of feeling as to give utterance to the fearful slander in his presence. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he felt that it was incumbent on him to take vengeance on

some one or other; and that since the unknown author was unattainable, the only thing to be done was to chastise whoever had ventured to repeat the calumny. But then, fortunately, it all of a sudden struck him that the miserable English language had but one word to express cooks of either sex. That made him see the matter in an altogether different light. The offensive saying had doubtless been aimed only at female cooks—in which case he had not a word to say against it, and could certainly not resent it as a personal insult. And as on reflection this appeared to him to be evidently the correct view to take, his ruffled dignity presently subsided, and he recovered his wonted serenity.

Be it said to his praise that he was every bit as particular over the cooking of a mutton chop as over that of a truffled ortolan; and would no more allow a boiled potato to issue from his kitchen in an ill-

prepared condition than he would the most artistic and showy *entrée* that the heart of cook ever devised. Of course, the fact of such a man being *chef* anywhere was a sufficient guarantee that in that house everything eatable would be first-rate of its kind, and so the Crœsus-Hoggs had engaged him at a tremendously high salary. And in every other department of their household there prevailed the same rule of conduct, viz., that no kind of excellence was to be wanting if it was procurable by money.

Now it has been already mentioned that the relations existing between Ethel and Lady Elise Bolyn were by no means to the liking of the latter. Firstly, because she was tired of keeping herself continually in check lest the worldly, selfish, hard, petty part of her disposition should become too apparent, and shock the more noble nature of the heiress. Secondly, because she had no love for the occupa-

tions and amusements of country life unless they afforded plentiful opportunities for flirtation, and therefore considered Carton House a dreadfully dull place to stay long at, and did not care about going back there. And thirdly, because she perceived the great difficulty of ever surrounding Ethel with tendrils of friendship strong and holding enough to be safe to rely on. Altogether, therefore, she had arrived at the conclusion that Ethel was a bad speculation; and that though she would be unwise to relinquish the intimacy to which she had already advanced before she should have found some more promising one to substitute for it, yet that it behoved her to search about for some other rich house at which to become a tame cat—some person to whom she could attach herself whose pecuniary advantages should be equal to those of Ethel, and who should be in other ways more satisfactory.

Under these circumstances the Crœsus-

Hoggs presented themselves to her mind as being not unworthy of attention, and she easily induced her mother to make their acquaintance. The more she saw of them, the more plainly did she perceive, that here was the very opening that she had been desiring. That they were by no means all that could be wished in regard of birth and behaviour, was no doubt a drawback. But experience had taught her, long ago, the vanity of expecting to have everything exactly to one's mind; and it was quite evident that if she chose to consort with these people, she would be welcomed with effusion, and neither pains nor money would be spared in trying to please her. Was it not wiser to be a little thick-skinned, and to make friends with Guinevere and Victoria Crœsus-Hogg, than to continue to attach herself to a person like Ethel? The latter had no doubt the recommendation of being a lady; but then how wearisome it was to feel

always obliged to be on one's P's and Q's, and to take trouble about making oneself agreeable lest one should lose innumerable luxuries and enjoyments which could only be reached by means of intimacy with their mistress's! With the Crœsus-Hoggs, on the contrary, Lady Elise need not give herself the very slightest trouble in order to be acceptable. Having no ancestors, they naturally adored the peerage, and ardently desired the privilege of associating with any of its members. Consequently they were every whit as anxious to have the favour of her company, as she could be to bestow it upon them. In their opinion, whatever she said or did was necessarily charming. Everything belonging to them was entirely at her service, and nothing could possibly be considered too good for her. They thought her affable, graceful, fascinating, the most enchanting of human beings, and were quite enraptured to find

themselves gliding into terms of familiarity with an earl's daughter.

At a very early stage of the acquaintance, Guinevere Crœsus-Hogg had one day hazarded the remark, what a happiness it would be if only her brother Guelph, could manage to please Lady Elise's fancy, and persuade her to marry him. At the time, the idea had been pooh-poohed by the others as a thing too good to be possible—a joy too unattainable to be worth reckoning on. A woman like her would of course be the very *beau ideal* of a wife for him; but then it was no use setting their hearts on such a piece of luck as that, because they would be so sure to be disappointed. But as Lady Elise's willingness to respond to their advances, and accept the invitations and other attentions which they offered her, became more and more apparent, the idea began to seem less unlikely after all; and they were now looking for-

ward with ever-increasing confidence to the glorious possibility of her one day becoming an actual member of their family.

Whether Lady Elise herself ever contemplated such a thing or not it was impossible to say. At all events she was continually in their company, partaking freely of all the good things they had to offer, and doing her best to shut her eyes to whatever peculiarities of manner, speech, or sentiment jarred against her aristocratic sense of what was fitting. She reflected that it was absurd to be over-particular about trifles with people who meant really well by one. Still it would certainly be a comfort, considering how often she dined with old Mr Crœsus-Hogg, if he were not so *very* fond of putting his knife into his mouth—and such a long way in too—almost down his throat sometimes! It was a thing to which she had an especial objection,

because she never saw it done without being in an agony lest the hand should slip, and the mouth be slit open; and that fear always communicated to her own lips a series of involuntary, smarting thrills of sympathy which continued till the misused knife had again returned to a place of safety. She would make herioc attempts to argue herself out of this weakness—reminding herself that even if the knife-sucker's hand *did* chance to slip, no one but himself could possibly be the worse for it; that she could look another way during the performance; that it was absurd to let a fad like that interfere with her enjoyment of Leblanc's exquisite cooking. But however well aware she might be of her own folly, she nevertheless could not wholly succeed in reconciling herself to her host's manner of eating; and if he happened to be away on any of the numerous occasions when she was at his house at meal-times, she invariably

hailed his absence with a feeling of grateful relief.

This was far from being the only way in which her natural prejudices were continually offended by her new friends, though as she was too philosophical and worldly wise not to be able to tolerate what was unpleasant when it was to her interest to do so, she gave no sign of the discomposure that they again and again caused her. But that did not prevent her from having often a secret sensation of annoyance—a sort of rising of the gorge in their company; and she always experienced an especial feeling of refreshment and content when once more mixing in the society of her equals after an unwontedly large dose of the family of the Crœsus-Hoggs.

## CHAPTER II.

### ETHEL'S WHIM.

'DEAR Ethel! how *fortunate* to find you at home!' exclaimed Lady Elise, gushingly, as she followed the footman into the room where Ethel and Imogen were. 'Mrs Crœsus-Hogg brought me here in her carriage, and I made her come early on purpose, because then I thought there might be some chance of catching you before you went out for the afternoon. It's quite an *age* since we've seen each other, isn't it?'

'Quite;' rejoined Ethel, gravely; 'two or three ages at least, I should say. I

think it really must be a whole week since you were here last. Do you find me much altered? or do I seem to be wearing pretty well?'

Lady Elise laughed rather affectedly. She could not quite make out whether this speech was mere harmless chaff, or whether perhaps Ethel's making fun of the exaggerated expression she had used, was meant ill-naturedly. For she did not feel very certain as to whether or not Ethel might be inclined in some way to resent finding herself deserted in favour of the Crœsus-Hoggs—and that uncertainty prevented Lady Elsie from being altogether at her ease just now.

'Ha, ha!' said she; 'what funny things you *do* say, Ethel! But I'm *too* delighted not to have missed you, as I want to ask a great, a particularly great favour of you. Only tell me something about yourself first. How are you? and have you had any news as to the stolen jewels yet?'

'Thank you; I'm quite well,' answered Ethel. 'I've not heard a word as to the jewels. When last I did have a communication on the subject, it was to the effect that the police had no further clue whatever.'

'Dear, dear! how terrribly provoking!' replied Lady Elise. 'Isn't it *too* wonderful where that man Richards can have hidden them? I think it's really *too* stupid of the police people not to find them out, or make him tell, or at any rate do something to punish him.'

'Why so, when he'd nothing whatever to do with the robbery?' said Imogen, firing up indignantly on behalf of the man whom she believed to be a persecuted innocent. 'I think it's very wrong of people to go on speaking of him as if he'd done it, when the jury have expressly said that he didn't. I should just like to see a few of them prosecuted for libel! That would soon teach them to be more careful.'

Lady Elise coloured at this blunt attack; and Ethel, knowing Imogen's uncompromising way of defending her own opinions, and fearing that a squabble was about to ensue, hastened to interpose before Lady Elise could reply.

'By-the-bye,' said Ethel, addressing her cousin, 'is the poor man well again, now? He was very ill, wasn't he, in the winter?'

'Yes, he was; but he's all right now, as far as health goes. Not in other ways, though, for all this bother about the burglary is driving him out of the country, and he's off to America next month. He and his wife hate going like poison, but there's no help for it. Lies and slanders have made this country too hot for them, and they can do no good staying in it any longer.'

'Going to America, is he?' said Lady Elise, endeavouring spitefully to aggravate the girl who had as good as told her she

was libellous. 'Ah, then depend upon it, that's where he's managed to send the jewels to. It's all a pretence that he doesn't like moving, and, of course, in reality he's looking forward to the fun he means to have there when he's disposed of his booty.'

A storm was inevitable if the conversation continued to relate to Richard Richards; so Ethel, with much presence of mind, promptly introduced a fresh topic.

'Pray do leave that wretched burglary alone,' she said; 'if you only knew how tired I am of it, I'm sure you wouldn't inflict it on me any more. Tell me instead about these grand amateur theatricals that the Crœsus-Hoggs are going to have, Elise. Of course you know all about it—what will be acted, and who'll act, and all the rest of it.'

'Well, I think I *do* know pretty much all that is settled, so far,' returned Lady

Elise. 'I assure you it's to be a *quite* too awfully tremendous affair.'

'So everyone seems to expect,' said Ethel. 'Mr Scriven declares that on that occasion all such adjuncts as dresses, decorations, scenery, flowers, supper, etc., are certain to be so splendid as to make it a very unimportant matter what the actors are like. Even if they were the veriest sticks that ever breathed, yet the performance cannot fail to be a success, he says. In fact, I suppose, it'll be like a picture whose setting and frame are sufficiently magnificent to carry off any shortcomings on the part of the artist. Who are going to act?'

'It is not altogether settled yet. Mr Trevor Owen is to act for one. I met him there at lunch to-day, and we've all been having a tremendous theatrical talk. By-the-bye, he gives me the idea of being quite wonderfully smitten with the eldest girl, Guinevere. She is to act also—

though I fancy she's rather made a mistake in the part she's chosen; they say her natural turn is for comedy, but unluckily she's taken it into her head to try melodrama this time, and I'm too dreadfully afraid that perhaps she won't succeed. There are to be two pieces acted, and she insists on being the leading lady in the second one; and as soon as he heard that, he made quite a *desperate* fuss to be let to play hero to her heroine; no one objected, so that much is arranged definitely, at all events.'

Then Trevor Owen also had gone over to the Crœsus-Hoggs! Ethel very well understood that this was what had happened, just as clearly as she had comprehended the meaning of Lady Elise's less frequent visits of late, and general diminution of attentions; for Miss Carton's passivity did not hinder her from being observant enough to have a very good idea of what went on around her. Not the faintest

wish had she, to retain either the lady or gentleman as worshippers at her own shrine, and their ready transfer of allegiance to the Crœsus-Hoggs, caused her no little amusement, untinged by the smallest particle of resentment. It was a matter of profound indifference to her whether Lady Elise and Trevor Owen might think it worth their while to continue to court her or not. But her indifference in this respect did not make it altogether agreeable to her to be shown thus plainly how very little her friends esteemed her for herself, and how entirely for what she was worth in L. S. D. She did not much relish having that fact brought home forcibly to her, however willing she might be to allow that it was no more than the truth. Therefore her self-love was a little bit wounded by what she had just heard. A hazy notion crossed her mind that she would like some day or other to exert herself for once; to show

people what sort of stuff she was really made of; to try and discover what she was really worth apart from her heiress ship. Only then the worst of doing that would be that it would be sure to involve a dreadful amount of trouble. And besides, it would be utterly inconsistent with her favourite masterly inaction policy!

'I can't say I've ever seen Miss Crœsus-Hogg, but no doubt she and Mr Owen will make an excellent couple,' she remarked sweetly. 'And who'll they have to act with them?'

'Well, there's a singing part which Lady George Quaver has half promised to undertake,' answered Lady Elise, 'and if so, it's sure to be a success—she has such an altogether *delicious* voice, you know. But there's another important male part besides the hero's in the piece, and their great hope is to get that Mr Sylvester to do it—the man who is with Messrs Glass at Cwm-Eithin. They say

he's a capital actor, and quite to be depended upon to make up for any unsteadiness in the leading couple. They've asked him to take the part, but he hasn't answered yet for certain. He says it must depend a good deal on his business engagements. Just now he's employed up in London. I believe he's going to be taken into partnership in a few weeks.'

'But you've only told us about the second play, yet,' said Ethel. 'Who are to be hero and heroine in the first one?'

Lady Elise looked a little bit conscious as she replied,—

'Oh, Mr Guelph Crœsus-Hogg is to have the chief man's *rôle;* and as for the woman's—I don't quite know—they are very anxious that I should see what I can do with it. Perhaps I may—indeed, I've almost as good as promised that I will. But there are *two* principal female parts in that piece—one almost as important as the other—and they pressed me so hard to

find some friend of mine for it, that it seemed quite ill-natured to refuse. And that's the especial object that's brought me here to-day. I didn't say a word to them about my idea, which is this: it suddenly occurred to me how awfully nice it would be if *you* were to take it, dearest Ethel. Now do pray say yes—it would be so quite *too* delightful if you would!'

'I am much obliged for the offer,' answered Ethel, laughing; 'but I'm afraid I must decline; I'm sure I should be too nervous for one thing. And besides, I distrust my acting capacities, and don't at all believe they'd be equal to such a great occasion.'

'Oh! now that's only your modesty,' returned Lady Elise, eagerly. 'I saw you acting once last year, and I remember you did it *quite* too capitally.'

'But then I don't know your friends,' objected Ethel; 'that's another reason against it.'

'I assure you that's *perfectly* immaterial,' said Lady Elise, who was very anxious to get as many people of her own set as possible to take part in the theatricals, in order to keep her in countenance. 'Not only would *any* friend of mine be welcome, but also I know that you are a person whose acquaintance they would be only too *enchanted* to make. Now *do* let me persuade you, there's a dear!'

Ethel was about to refuse absolutely, when all of a sudden it struck her that this would be an opportunity for her to carry out that fancy which had just now come to her for showing what she could do, and finding out people's real opinion of her. Acting was an amusement for which she believed herself to have some turn. Why not appear incog. and see what reception she would meet with from an audience who had no knowledge of who she really was? It was a sudden, wild idea, very unlike her usual prudent and indolent self, and doubtless

owing its origin to that little sting which her self-love had just received.

'Well, perhaps it might not be bad fun, if no one knew it was me,' she returned, after a moment's consideration. 'Do you think that could be managed? Could I alter myself in dressing for the part, so as not to be recognised?'

Imogen stared in surprise at this utterly unexpected reply, and almost doubted the evidence of her own ears. What could the tranquil and aristocratic Ethel be thinking of, to condescend to join in the revels of these vulgarians? As it was Ethel who contemplated this freak, there must doubtless be some good reason therefor; and it was very certain that Ethel herself could not become in the slightest degree tainted by contact with their vulgarity, whatever she might do. Still—it was extremely incomprehensible.

Lady Elise was astonished also. She had thought there was enough chance of

securing the heiress to make the attempt not altogether a hopeless one; yet she had not much expected to succeed, and was delighted to see such ready signs of yielding.

'Oh dear, yes!' she exclaimed; 'you can alter yourself as easily as *possible.* It's the part of an elderly woman; and what with doing your hair differently, and the dress and get-up altogether, there wouldn't be the faintest difficulty about making you unrecognisable. Only there's the name on the play-bills,' she added; 'you forget that that would tell who you are.'

'Not if I took some other name,' said Ethel. 'I might adopt my second name, and appear as Miss Percival, you know. I don't suppose there would be any harm in doing that.'

'Harm!' rejoined Lady Elise. 'Why, what harm *could* there be in it? Of course not! Then let's consider the

matter settled, shall we? Oh! this is quite *too* delicious!'

'Well, I can't say for certain till I've asked my uncle,' said Ethel; 'but if he makes no objection, you can send me the part. In that case I shall learn it by myself at home and not with the other performers, so as avoid being Miss Percival as much as I can. I don't know that I shall altogether like appearing under false colours, and it'll be quite enough to have to do it on the day of the performance without multiplying the occasions needlessly.'

'There'll be the rehearsals though,' observed Imogen. 'Won't you have to go to them?'

'I don't see that would be necessary if I work up my part alone thoroughly. At any rate I should think I might manage not to want to attend more than one. Mr Owen is the person who would be most likely to recognise me amongst the other

actors ; but as he acts in the other piece, and as I shouldn't stay a minute longer than was absolutely indispensable, I dare-say I should be able to keep out of his way.'

'Oh, no doubt you would!' cried Lady Elise. 'And I'll use all my influence with the Crœsus-Hoggs to make everything smooth for you, and to keep your secret from them and everyone else. *Do* go and ask your uncle, dearest Ethel! I'm quite *dying* to feel that I've actually secured you. I'm convinced you'll have no difficulty with him, and that he won't object to *anything* you wish to do.'

'I don't quite know about that,' said Ethel, smiling. 'If I were to wish to have a finger in the construction of that machine he's making, I've an idea he'd object very strongly indeed. However, I'll go and see what he says to the acting scheme.'

So saying she went to his room, leaving her two visitors to turn over photograph

books, remark that it was a fine day, and preserve an armed neutrality till her return.

'Well?' exclaimed Lady Elise, eagerly, as soon as Ethel reappeared.

'He says I may do as I like; so I'll try what I can do with this *rôle* of yours, provided you and Imogen promise faithfully not to breathe a syllable that can make anyone suspect Miss Percival and Miss Carton to be identical. Absolute incog. is the condition upon which alone I'll act, remember.'

Her cousin and Lady Elise readily promised secrecy; and when the latter met the Crœsus-Hoggs that night she told them that she had induced a friend of hers named Percival to act in the same piece as herself in the approaching theatricals.

Little did anyone anticipate how those theatricals were destined to end, and how much difference would ensue from Ethel's sudden whim of appearing incognito in them!

## CHAPTER III.

### SYLVESTER AND LOVE.

HOW did the land lie between Imogen and Mr Sylvester? Was there any real cause for Sir Charles' disquietude?

Mr Sylvester was a man who generally made a very definite impression of some kind on whoever had much to do with him —his identity marking itself strongly on the memory something like that of a scent, which whether pleasant or not, is too powerful to be easily forgotten by anyone who has once known it. It was only natural, therefore, that Imogen should think a good deal

about him, and that he should occupy in her mind a niche of his own which was quite apart from that of anyone else. Dangerous symptoms, no doubt! The man who is much in a girl's thoughts, and has secured a special niche in her mental furniture, is not unlikely to finish by gaining possession of her heart. But though Imogen liked Sylvester, she had not yet got any farther than that. She was dimly conscious that his powers of attraction were counterbalanced by occasional glimpses of something in his nature that seemed almost terrifying and mysterious. And it was probably owing to this vague consciousness that she had so far escaped falling in love with him.

She fancied that there was an alteration in him now from what he had been when first she made his acquaintance. Then he had seemed much the same sort of person at all times; but of late he had grown more uncertain, and it was impossible to reckon

beforehand on what sort of a humour he would be in. One day he would be fierce, reckless, hard and cynical; and on the next, perhaps, almost like another man; gentle, and giving her a strange sense of pity for she knew not what, and of being in the presence of something sad, of witnessing some repressed and terrible trouble of either mind or body. Sometimes she would fancy that his old cynicism and hardness were diminishing; and then again would tell herself that it was not so in reality, and that what made her think so was only because by this time she had become accustomed to these things, and did not therefore always notice them now as much as she had done at first. Anyhow he was a sphinx to her—a being whom she had no key to understand. And, fearless as she naturally was, yet there were times when she was by no means sure in her secret soul that she was not a little bit afraid of this man.

When she speculated (as she did occasionally) on the way in which she regarded him, there was one point that especially exercised her mind, and seemed to her unaccountable. It was a favourite opinion of hers, and one which she had often maintained hotly in discussion with him, or anyone else who happened to talk about the reasons for people's liking one another, that likings were impossible between persons who had nothing in common, and could not thoroughly trust each other. Now she could not deny that she certainly did like Mr Sylvester in a way; and yet when she asked herself whether he and she had anything in common, and whether he was a man in whom she felt confidence, she had very considerable doubts of being able to answer in the affirmative. How was that? Was her theory an unsound one then? She knew that in respect of all the other people whom she liked, she could say unhesitatingly that she had

points of sympathy with them, and would not hesitate to trust to them. Take her father, for instance, or Ethel, or Ralph, or —or—Sir Charles Dover. Though she did not want to marry this last, yet she did not for a moment deny that she liked him; but then it was quite according to her theory that she should do so.

He knew nothing about moths, it was true, and had even been so stupid as to suppose she could want a couple of *Thyatira Batis* (poor fellow! he had meant it kindly all the same; and what trouble he must have had about the setting of them!); but still she had not the faintest doubt that most of his tastes, occupations, and amusements would be congenial to her, and such as she could sympathise with. She had discovered, too, that he had high principles, and an honest desire to do right. She knew it intuitively, though he never said much about it; and, as for trusting him—why, the idea that anyone who did

that would ever find their confidence misplaced, was an absurdity too great to be contemplated seriously! Oh yes; it was the most natural thing in the world to like such a person as that, and there was no difficulty whatever about understanding it. But why should she care at all for Mr Sylvester, who was so absolutely different? Had he some strange power—she hardly knew whether to call it attractive or repellant—which was peculiar to himself? Some power that could even dwarf, overshadow, and make to appear as of comparative unimportance, the virtues to which other people owed their likeableness, so as to enable him to be independent of such things?

But whatever doubt there might be as to the state of Imogen's sentiments towards Sylvester, there was none at all as to his towards her. She had attracted him from the first moment when he had heard her voice, and that attraction had gone on

increasing at every successive meeting till it had at last taken possession of his whole nature.

It must not be supposed that he gave way to this feeling without a struggle. It gained insidiously upon him for a while without his realising what was happening to him, and when at last it one day dawned upon him that he was beginning to fall seriously in love, he became alarmed, and made up his mind at once to crush a weakness that might prove prejudicial to his interests. He meant to live alone, to concentrate his energies wholly on pushing himself on in the world; and had long ago determined never to let himself be hampered and kept down by a wife and family clinging to his heels, expecting to share his substance, and to be provided for. A pretty idea for such a man as him, indeed!

But Imogen had a charm for him that was more potent even than his schemes

of ambition and calculating selfishness, and presently he was forced to confess to himself with amazement that he had been encountered by a power that was strong enough to conquer even him—invincible as he had hitherto believed himself to be.

What was to be the end of it all? He had lied, cheated, embezzled, committed burglary. If anyone had ever stood in his way, or seemed to threaten rivalry, he had not hesitated to get that person removed from his path by either fair means or foul; he cared nothing for right or wrong, and had lived only for himself—fighting his way upwards in the world boldly, unscrupulously, and successfully, though often at great risks. And she—how utterly different to all this she was with her ignorance of evil; her quaintly-earnest, though somewhat spasmodic unhappiness at not knowing how to set to work in order to advance the general good

of humanity; her ready belief in others without suspecting them to be less sincere than herself; her downright honesty; her delight in innocent pursuits and amusements; her freedom from desire for any other position of life than that in which she found herself; her horror of injustice, falsehood, and wrong. How enormous was the contrast between them, and by how deep a gulf were their real selves separated from one another! Would it ever be possible to bridge over that gulf, the full magnitude of which could be known to no creature save himself?

If she had been only more like him! But there he stopped short. Was it not a profanation to imagine her as false, faithless, hard, with dark secrets that would, if known, make her unable to show her face openly, and go about like other people? Would her charm for him ever have existed if she had been such an one as that? Would he not, in that

case, have probably been indifferent to her, or perhaps have even regarded her with disgust? Yet no! it must be mere folly to suppose that; for why should one dislike in another person the qualities that one most approved of and cherished in one's-self. Ah! but then the question was whether he *did* approve of them in himself? Was there no mistake in thinking that? Was he absolutely certain that he was as well satisfied with himself as he had imagined—and that he would not be glad, were it possible, to alter the past in order that he might now be more like her?

Such were the questions that forced themselves upon him with a rush of passionate longing for her affection, and a bitter sense of the width and depth of the formidable gulf dividing him from her. Next moment he was fiercely indignant with himself for being thus troubled. Was he a mere weak fool to

want to undo what he had done?—to become ashamed of himself and of the life he had led? It was hardly likely, indeed!

But no amount of resentment could alter what was the real state of the case. Whether he liked it or not, none the less was it the truth that the influence of his love for Imogen had begun to take effect upon him, and to undermine the foundations of the evil stronghold that had seemed to be planted so securely. Had it not been for that, he would not have hesitated about what to do in regard to trying to marry her, and would have avoided a difficulty that now tormented him.

Here was the dilemma in which he found himself. Should he let her see the gulf between them, and then ask her to be his wife? Or should he give her up? Or should he try to get her to marry him without giving her any inkling of what he really was? To tell his

secrets seemed impossible. Not only would he have to fly the country if they should be known ; but also, what chance was there that she would consent to be the wife of a man with such a past life as his ? Yet to resign all further idea of winning her was a thing that he certainly could not bear to do. The only course remaining, therefore, was not to tell her anything, and try to make her his wife all the same. There could be no reason why a man with no principles should object to that course ; yet somehow the idea of it was revolting to him —in some way or other it seemed most especially villainous, and he could not manage to reconcile himself to the thought of adopting it, in spite of all the arguments urged by reasonable selfishness in its favour. Look at matters how he would, there was that past life of his with its evil deeds rising up sternly to shut him off from her, and he bitterly

realised the truth of two lines in *Felix Holt* :—

> 'And having tasted stolen honey,
> You can't buy innocence for money.'

With passion swaying him to and fro, and his newly awakened conscience struggling for its proper place at the helm, he kept veering from side to side according as conscience succeeded or failed in its struggle; and this caused the alterations that Imogen had observed in him of late. The powerful passenger, Love, having come on board had disarranged everything and deprived him of the command of his own ship. At one moment he was ready to give the whole world to make her care for him; and then, again, he would ask himself what good that would be when, even if he were to succeed, he would not know what to do next. He felt, vaguely, that he was changing—that a conflict whose issue he could not foretell was going on within him—that his will seemed to

have lost its former strength; and he would get angry, sometimes almost maddened, at the doubts and passions that distracted him.

He thought of Tennyson's lines:—

> 'Tis better to have loved and lost,
> Than never to have loved at all;'

and wondered that anyone who had ever loved should have written them. As far as he could see, it was impossible for love ever to lead to anything but misery and disappointment. Supposing it not to be returned, then how pitiable was the state of the poor lover who was doomed to find that his patient waiting, devotion, dreams, and hopes had been all in vain; and that the thing he most longed for in the whole world was hopelessly unattainable. Or, take another case, suppose that the love were returned after a lukewarm and half-hearted fashion, with none of the warmth and energy that inspired the lover. Was

*that* likely to content the poor wretch? Would he not be tormented by restless jealousy, and wistful cravings that pride would perhaps forbid him to show? And when at last he should come to realise the truth—to realise the futility of his longings, and perceive that he could never hope to receive such deep, true, affection as he had himself given—would not the pain of unrequited love be an enduring, gnawing ache that would be worse to bear than any transient bodily pang? Much happiness *that* man would have derived from love! Or say, again, that the affection given were returned with equal ardour, so that it might seem at first sight as though here, at least, love must have brought satisfaction. Yet could that really be the case when the state of bliss would be marred by the knowledge of its liability to be broken in upon by death and separation? The more perfect the happiness—and perfect indeed such happiness would

be—the more terrible would be the dread of losing it. Its destruction could leave only broken hearts (if such things really were), and a dreary, blank future that would be one continual regretful retrospect at past joys that could never come again. Who was to be called happy with the possibility of such a fate as that hanging over him? And since these were the necessary consequences of love—a mysterious power that when once it took hold of a man so altered his whole nature as to prevent his ever again being the same as before—how could anyone speak of it as the poet did? It was nearly enough to make one suppose that he did not know what he was talking of, and had never truly loved in his life—only then it was impossible to read the rest of *In Memoriam* and think that.

That Sylvester should have reasoned in this way was but natural, for it would have been absurd to expect of such a man

as him that he should perceive any possible good to be derived from love apart from the gratification of self. If he had been told that love was far higher and better than what he imagined it to be; and that its beautifying, elevating, and purifying tendency was capable of benefiting people even whilst causing them anxiety, sorrow, failure, loss, and disappointment, he would have jeered at the notion as fit only for a lunatic asylum.

In considering this man's character, be it remembered especially that it was not altogether his own doing that he was what he was, and that he would probably have been far different and better had he had some one to love him and be good to him when a child, and save him from concentrating his affections wholly upon himself as he had done. Now at last, however, they were being shaken by a still more powerful magnet that attracted him elsewhere, and his whole system

was thrown into commotion by their movement.

Yet the magnet knew nothing of its own power. Imogen, with faults, follies, and virtues blended together according to the wont of humanity, never dreamt how she was revolutionising his nature; how likely any chance word of hers was to give it a bend or straighten it; what power, for good or for evil, she had over him.

Ethel's unconsciously-exercised influence over herself ought perhaps to have taught her the possibility that she, in her turn, might also be influencing some other person without knowing it. But the lesson had not come home to her yet, and she had not even begun to realise what an amount of work—both good and bad—is performed in this world of ours by unconscious influence.

# CHAPTER IV.

## PICNICKING.

IT was one morning about a week after Miss Carton had consented to take part in the Crœsus-Hoggs theatricals, that Sylvester sat in his room considering the same question as regarded himself. He had been asked to act with the most flattering urgency, but had postponed replying until he could be sure what would be required of him in respect of some business arrangements. Now, however, he had just ascertained that they need not stand in his way, and was about

to accept the Crœsus-Hogg invitation, when it suddenly struck him that before doing that, he might as well try and find out whether or no Ethel would be at the party.

Of course he was quite prepared for the very probable contingency of having to make her acquaintance at some time or other; he did not anticipate evil consequences from that event, for he believed there was no chance whatever of her identifying the voice, manner, and appearance of his natural self, with those that he had assumed as a burglar. Still, as there could be no use in running any needless risks, he meant to keep out of her way if possible, and had hitherto contrived, without exciting suspicion, to avoid the various opportunities of being presented to her that had occurred through his attachment to Imogen's society.

If he had thought it a wise precaution thus to shun meeting Miss Carton under

ordinary social conditions, still more would it be prudent to do so when he would be disguised as a man of the lower orders, which was the part he was requested to take in the theatricals. Under those circumstances there would evidently be an increased danger of the sight of him awakening awkward recollections in her mind; so he came to the conclusion that he would decline the Crœsus-Hogg invitation if she were likely to be present at the performance. He was pretty sure that she was not acquainted with the Crœsus-Hoggs, but would easily be able to ascertain the fact for certain from Imogen; therefore he would postpone answering the invitation till he should have found out what he wanted to know from her. The delay this would involve would be only trifling, as he was to meet her on that same day at a picnic up the river, to which he knew that she and her father were going.

The giver of the picnic was Lady Gough, wife of the member for Cwm-Eithin, and amongst her guests on the occasion was another of Imogen's admirers, viz., Sir Charles Dover. The party was composed of about a dozen or so of people, who had been invited to assemble at Putney. There boats were in waiting to convey them up the river; and a very merry and contented set of people they were, as they rowed along in the bright sunshine, except Sir Charles, who was anything but satisfied with the situation which Fortune (as represented by the hostess, Lady Gough) had assigned to him.

He had been in the very act of following Imogen into the boat where she was taking her seat, when he had been recalled by the voice of Lady Gough, telling him off to another boat, in which he found himself placed next to a Miss Smith, who was going through a course

of cookery lectures at South Kensington, and could talk of nothing else. In the most liberal spirit she endeavoured to impart to all other people — partners, casual acquaintances, visitors, or whoever she might happen to meet—the instructions in the culinary art which she was herself receiving. She never by any chance remembered the quantities, proportions, or length of time required in preparing the various dishes she described, so that, perhaps, her well-meant endeavours to promote useful knowledge may have been less efficacious than she intended. But then, as she said herself, those little finikin matters were mere matters of detail, and would soon come afterwards—the grand thing was to know what ingredients to use. The art of manufacturing *beurre noire* and *matelotes* was at present occupying her mind; and butter, pepper, nutmeg, anchovy, button mushrooms, button onions, tarragon vine-

gar, capers, and similar things were the sole topics of her conversation. Cooped up beside her, in a boat, the poor baronet could not help himself, and had to endure her perforce ; but the first use he made of his legs, on regaining dry land and liberty, was to fly beyond reach of her voice.

A clump of trees, standing in the midst of a large, uneven common, was the spot fixed upon for that feeding process, which is the essential point of a picnic ; and though the trees were some distance off from the stream, it was not long before the materials for the feast were transferred thither from the boats by the servants and some of the gentlemen of the party.

At lunch Sir Charles was more fortunate than before, and managed to secure the place next Imogen ; but afterwards his luck seemed to have again deserted him. The party broke up into small divisions as soon as the meal was over, and dispersed in various directions, to flirt,

smoke, walk, sit still, sketch, botanize, or snooze, according to the bent of their several inclinations; and his ambition naturally was to attach himself to his lady love. He was, however, shy of doing so without being invited, or receiving some mark of encouragement; for the consciousness that he was a rejected lover made him always very much afraid of boring her, or of appearing to want to force himself upon her against her will.

Whilst he hung about near her, hoping that she would ask him to join her, or that he might find some colourable pretext for doing so, Sylvester stepped in and carried her off. Having entered into conversation with her, he managed by degrees to get her away from the people by whom she had been standing, and they were soon wandering off together alone. Sir Charles looked after them enviously, and had half a mind to go and join them unasked. But thus to intrude himself

on two people who were evidently agreeable to one another, and perfectly contented without a third person, would be both ill-natured and ungentlemanlike, so he resolved to keep out of their way. As long as she was happy, he had no right to interfere, he knew very well; but that did not make it any the pleasanter for him, when he felt that he was being left out in the cold, and that his rival was having everything his own way. He might, if he liked, have consoled himself with someone else, as one or two of the other girls of the party would readily have taken him in tow, and been agreeable to him if he had been at all disposed to accept their ministrations. But his head was far too full of Imogen to make that possible, and he moved about disconsolately without in the least perceiving the gentle indications which they gave of their benevolent intentions.

Really, it was too bad for that Sylvester

to be eternally in her pocket—it didn't give anyone else a chance. And yet Ralph had declared positively that he was sure it didn't mean anything. Sir Charles would like to know what the boy would say about it now, if he were here to see what was going on! What awfully stupid things picnics were. Might do well enough, and too well, too! for spooning purposes no doubt, but otherwise there could be no possible satisfaction to be had out of them —unless one happened to have a taste for ants and other insects with one's food, and for little caterpillars crawling about the back of one's neck! There was nothing to do, and one had to go on all day talking to the same stupid people, and all saying the same stupid sort of things.

In this discontented frame of mind he was discovered and taken possession of by Lady Gough, who was the only other companionless member of the party. Being a social humbug of the first water, and

most conscientious, she proceeded immediately to do her duty both by this waif and herself according to her lights: that is to say, she endeavoured to get through the time with as little *ennui* as possible, and to convey to other people the impression that it was by deliberate selection and preference that she and her cavalier were walking about together, and not at all because of their having happened to be the only two members of the party who had been left alone by the others, and had no one else to fall back upon.

And to her care we will leave him whilst we follow Imogen and Sylvester, who had by this time seated themselves comfortably close to a heap of stones, on a sloping part of the common, some distance off from the clump of trees.

'Have you yet made up your mind whether or not to act at the Crœsus-Hogg party?' she was saying.

'Not quite,' he replied; 'I suppose that

if I do, you will look down on me with contempt. I know very well what an aversion you have to those poor people, and that in your secret heart you consider it a mean truckling to money on the part of anyone who goes near them. Now, isn't that true? And don't you mean to despise every soul who goes to their party?'

Imogen looked as if she did not altogether relish this question.

'Well — no — not altogether,' she answered, with some confusion. 'The fact is, I believe I shall be there myself after all.'

'*You!*' said Sylvester with surprise; 'I certainly did not think anything would have induced Miss Rhys to condescend to be entertained by a Crœsus-Hogg! What can have caused such a change of purpose? Is it that an exalted personage is said to be likely to be there, and that you think wherever the prince goes it would be unbecoming of his

subjects not to follow him; or in other words, that you won't be out of the fashion?'

He knew well enough that she would scorn the imputation of being influenced by a motive which she would consider snobbish, and was prepared for the indignant denial with which she met it.

'Most certainly not!' she exclaimed; 'what he chooses to do has nothing whatever to do with me. It may be all right enough for him to go. As a farmer's rent comes from all his animals, it may be that he's bound to visit them all alike, and include the pig-sty in his rounds. But it doesn't follow that the horse, dog, cow, and nobler inmates of the farm-yard need follow his example.'

'Well, but a week ago you declared that you did not know, or wish to know these people; and yet now you say you are going to their house. How is the transformation to be accounted for?'

'It's no doing of *mine;* you may be very sure of that,' she answered rather crossly; 'and I'm not at all pleased to have to go. The way it came about was this. A few nights ago we met these horrid people at dinner, and it happened that Mrs Crœsus-Hogg fell to papa's lot as a partner. Unluckily he made a favourable impression on her, I suppose, for she couldn't be satisfied without pressing him to come to the bit of a party she was "going to 'ave," making him introduce her to me after dinner, and saying she should come and call on us if he had no objection. You know that dear good father of mine can't bear saying "No" to anyone; and what's more, I really do believe he was rather amused with the vulgar old thing, and thinks it'll be fun to go to her "bit of a party," so he just said yes to whatever she wanted, and promised faithfully to take me to the theatricals. So next day she came and called in due form, and

left us a card of invitation. I don't think I ever saw such a hideous thing of the kind before! An immense big affair with a gorgeous crest and elaborately ugly letters standing out in solid gold; a border wonderfully illuminated in the rawest and most ill-matched colours; and a smell of scent that's enough to knock one down! I had to go and wash my fingers ever so often to get the smell out after merely touching it. And papa insisted on accepting, and declares that we are to go; so we shall have to, I suppose.'

Her voice and looks showed how intensely aggrieved she considered herself to be. Her companion could not help being amused at it; yet it gave him a pang, too, to be thus reminded of her intolerance of whatever she disapproved of, and he would have preferred a tendency to leniency of judgment which might some day prove to his own advantage.

'After all,' he said with a half sigh, 'I

think you should remember that there *may* be some good in people and things even although they do not entirely correspond to your standard of excellence. By-the-bye, that reminds me of your cousin Miss Carton, whom I know you admire. Is she as particular as yourself? Does she admit the Crœsus-Hoggs to her visiting list?'

Imogen had not forgotten that no hint was to be given of Ethel's intention to be one of the actors, and shook her head. 'No,' she returned; 'they're not there yet, to my positive knowledge. But I do wish you knew Ethel; I'm sure you'd like her—she's so awfully nice. I really *must* introduce you to her. You know I've meant to do it several times already, only something or other has always just happened to prevent it. There's been quite a fate against it!'

This was not quite so unaccountable to Sylvester as it was to Imogen, since he

had himself on each occasion, contrived the obstacle which had interfered with the introduction. However, he did not mean her to suspect that, so he replied hypocritically,—'Yes, I certainly have been wonderfully unfortunate in that respect hitherto, but I must hope for better luck in the future. It wont be at the Crœsus-Hoggs I'm afraid though, as I think you said that she wont be there, didn't you?'

Imogen would not tell a lie about it, nor would she betray the secret entrusted to her, so she evaded giving a direct answer.

'I know positively that they are complete strangers to each other,' she replied; 'they've never met, called, or had any communication together. But to go back to what I asked you at first. I wish you'd make up your mind to act as they want you to do. I'm interested in the matter myself, now that I shall be there. I should like to see you perform—do say yes.'

It was sweet to him to be asked by her, and he looked earnestly and longingly at her.

'Consider it done, then,' he said softly. 'If a thing pleases you, that is reason enough for it in my eyes. It would need a weighty argument indeed that could prevent my endeavouring to gratify your lightest wish.'

Gesture, voice, and look are often more expressive than words; and Imogen was suddenly conscious of a deep wistful tenderness about her companion that made her feel uneasy, and think she would like to rejoin the rest of the party, though she did not exactly know why. Her embarrassment was terminated, however, almost before perceived, by a startling cry which was now borne down the wind to their ears, and made her forget about everything else. That cry was 'Mad dog! mad dog!'

## CHAPTER V.

### A MAD DOG.

FEW people care to sit still with a mad dog loose about somewhere close by, and the shout that Imogen and Sylvester had heard, brought them to their feet in a moment. On looking round they saw a large dog, at some distance off, running towards them with a couple of men in full chase after it.

'Let's make for those trees where we lunched!' cried Imogen. 'There are plenty of low branches there that we can climb into, and be safe.'

'They're too far off!' returned Sylvester,

anxiously. 'We shouldn't have time. If the dog keeps on as he's going now, he'll be past the trees, and meet us before we could possibly get there.'

This being evidently the case, they looked about the great common for some other place of safety, but could see nothing more promising than the rough heap of stones near which they had been sitting.

'Those stones are our best chance!' exclaimed Sylvester. 'We must crouch down there, so that the brute won't see us, and will pass straight on. Let's get out of sight as quick as possible! Whatever you do, keep quiet, so as not to attract his attention.'

As he spoke, he drew her towards the heap, where they squatted down, and concealed themselves on the side opposite to that from which the dog was coming.

Sylvester felt a thrill of passionate joy at the thought that he and she were exposed to the same danger, and that there

was no one but himself to protect her. He would have given much for an efficient weapon at that moment; but, unluckily, he had nothing more formidable than a penknife about him. A penknife might be better than nothing, however, so he took it out of his pocket and opened it, kneeling beside her with the determination that not one hair of her head should be injured, whatever it might cost him to defend her. Her safety was of the first importance to him, while for his own he gave not one thought — so inconsistent with his selfish natural self had love made him.

'You are as safe as if you were in your own drawing-room,' he whispered to her earnestly. 'Even if the dog *should* see and attack us, I swear that he shall not touch you—that my body shall barricade you from him as effectually as any walls could do.'

At this moment something fresh ap-

peared upon the scene, and caused Imogen to make an effort to spring up, which intention of hers was, however, promptly frustrated by her companion.

'Oh, look, look! What shall we do to save them?' she exclaimed in horrified tones, pointing towards what had so disturbed her.

A little distance before them, and exactly in the direction that the dog was taking, there was a rise on the common, and over the brow of this hillock there suddenly came in sight a lot of school children out walking with their teachers, and all unconscious of the approaching danger, which they were making for in a direct line. Imogen's impulse was to start up instantly and to wave them back, without thinking of the peril that she might thus incur by making the dog notice her; but Sylvester was alive to this danger, and when she tried to move, he held her down by main force.

'Keep quiet, whatever you do,' he whispered; 'you can't help them, and will only be exposing yourself to danger for nothing. Let them mind themselves—they're not *our* look-out.'

'Yes they are! They're everybody's look-out! Poor little souls—let me go!' she exclaimed breathlessly as she redoubled her vain efforts to free herself from his strong grasp. Then suddenly desisting from her fruitless struggles, and remembering that shouting would warn them equally well, she cried triumphantly,—

'But you can't stop my mouth at any rate!' And then, without heeding his remonstrances, she began shouting out,—'Mad dog! Get out of the way! Run!' as loud as she could.

The school heard her, and stopped in alarm; looked blankly this way and that, and then—seeing no safe refuge anywhere—took to its heels in all directions, tumbling and shrieking as it fled. In this stampede

was plainly to be seen how widely the natures differed from one another; for while some of the teachers and bigger girls made off as fast as their legs could carry them without a thought of anyone else, others, of a more chivalrous disposition, stayed to catch up some one or other of the tinies into their arms, or to give it a helping hand in the race.

'Oh, *do* let us go to them!' cried Imogen, struggling with her jailer. 'Surely we could help some of those poor little tots!'

But Sylvester was immoveable.

'No, no,' said he, coolly; 'you needn't suppose I'm going either to let you run into danger, or to go myself and leave you here unprotected on account of a lot of strange brats like that. All I care for is to look after you, and nothing shall make me stir from your side till you are safe again. Jove! what a *sauve-qui-peut* it is amongst them. Hullo though! There

must be something new going on. What's making them all stand still, and stare back like that? and what can that fresh shouting be about that I hear now?'

Evidently something exciting was to be seen in the direction whence the foe was advancing; for first one and then another of the fugitives looked round, stopped running, and began gazing behind them, till they were all at a standstill.

The explanation of this apparently incomprehensible behaviour was as follows:—

The dog had got very nearly abreast of the clump of trees already mentioned, when a man who was safely ensconced amongst them emerged from their friendly shelter, armed with nothing better than a shawl, placed himself straight in the animal's path, and deliberately awaited its approach. As soon as the dog was within reach, the man, without letting go the ends of the shawl, dexterously flung the middle part so as to entangle the dog's head and

blindfold it for a moment. Profiting by this momentary check and blindness, the man sprang astride upon the dog's shoulders before it could get itself free, and there he gripped it firmly with his knees and twisted the shawl as tightly as he could round its neck so as to bewilder and half throttle it. The dog, which was large and strong, naturally disliked these proceedings, and showed its resentment by growling, snapping, trying to bite its rider, and doing all it could to disentangle itself. The rider, however, was not to be dislodged, and managed—though with considerable difficulty—to stick to his place on the back of the blinded and floundering creature, and to avoid its teeth, till the men in pursuit arrived to his assistance and put an end to the dog's life with their sticks.

Public safety being thus re-established, people ventured out from hiding-places in all directions ; the scattered school as-

sembled together again (with the exception of a few of the swiftest and most cowardly who were by that time clean out of sight and hearing); and things in general speedily returned to their ordinary condition.

Only the last part of the combat between the man and dog had been witnessed by Imogen and Sylvester, as during the beginning of it they had been crouching down behind the stones out of sight. Consequently they did not know that the man had voluntarily left a place of safety in order to engage in the fight. They had seen quite enough, however, to excite Imogen's admiration for his bravery. She was very angry with Sylvester for having prevented her from going to the rescue of the school, and fully intended to expostulate with him on the subject; but for the moment she could think only of the exciting battle that had just taken place and of her anxiety lest the hero of it should have got hurt.

'What a plucky fellow that is!' she said, 'and how splendidly he managed the dog! I couldn't quite see whether he got bitten or not; I do hope he didn't. Let's go and see.'

Without waiting for an answer she set off quickly towards the trees, and Sylvester followed her rather sulkily. He did not like to think that she owed her deliverance, after all, to someone else than himself; and he felt irritated and jealous to hear her bestowing praises upon this other man, whoever he might be—for they had been too far off to make out if it was anyone they knew or not. The conqueror of the dog was surrounded by a group of people who hid him from sight at first, and it was not till Imogen was quite close that she discovered him to be Sir Charles Dover.

'I do hope you aren't hurt!' she exclaimed, hurrying towards him in evident anxiety for his safety. 'Did the dog bite you at all?'

If Sylvester had hitherto been to be envied for securing her society, now, at least, whilst Sir Charles saw that he stood first (though it might be but for a moment) in her thoughts and interests, he would not have exchanged places with anyone else in the whole world.

'Oh no, thanks!' he replied, flushing with sudden pleasure, even though for an instant he felt almost regretful at having escaped unhurt. For if he had been bitten, would not that have procured him the felicity of remaining interesting to her for a yet longer period? 'The brute never quite managed to reach me; he only got his teeth as far as my coat and tore that a little.'

'I'm so glad,' returned she; 'it looked much too close quarters to be pleasant from where I was. But I don't quite understand how it all happened, for I didn't see the dog's first attack on you. I almost wonder you couldn't have got out of the way, being so close to the trees.'

'Close to the trees!' echoed Lady Gough, 'why, my dear Miss Rhys, he was actually in perfect safety. When the alarm was heard he and I were together, and both of us climbed safely upon a bough. And then all of a sudden down he jumped, and went out to fight the dog armed only with a shawl of mine that he had been carrying. It was the bravest, coolest thing possible. I'm sure he deserves a medal, or a Victoria cross, or something, as much as anyone ever did in this world.'

'By Jove! I forgot your shawl, though, Lady Gough; I'm afraid it's all to rags!' exclaimed Sir Charles, who, though not afraid to face the mad dog, was made extremely bashful and uncomfortable by the commendations that Lady Gough and others were beginning to bestow upon him freely.

He did what he could to turn the conversation into some other channel; and

Imogen, seeing how it annoyed him to talk about his performance, forbore to say anything more about it just then when everyone else was talking and listening to him. There was something she wanted to know, however, and by-and-by, when he and she and Sylvester happened to be standing a little apart from the rest of the party, she said,—

'Then you were in safety and there was no actual necessity for you to have meddled with the dog at all, Sir Charles, only you went out of your way to do it. I want to know exactly what made you do that, if you don't mind telling me.'

'Oh, well—you see for one thing—I—I—I wasn't quite sure about you,' answered he with a little hesitation. 'I knew you were somewhere about, and I didn't know whether you were safe or not. And then besides that there were all those poor children you know. It would have been shameful for a great

strong fellow like me to sit still and see a dangerous brute go running a-muck with a lot of women and children about and not try to stop it? And then there wasn't really any risk to me either; for if one gets bitten it's easy enough to be made safe by being cauterised, you know.'

'Thanks for telling me your reason. I'm so glad you thought the poor children worth caring for,' said Imogen, glancing meaningly at Sylvester; 'I'm sure you did perfectly right. It would have been horrid to leave them to themselves.'

Sylvester perfectly understood the rebuke conveyed to him by her glance and speech. She had not expostulated with him as she had at first intended, for not letting her go to help the school; but she had evinced her displeasure instead by taking no notice of him since rejoining the rest of the party. He knew very well what caused her avoidance of him, and chafed internally at

being thus punished for what he could not understand her regarding as a crime.

He had been ready joyfully to sacrifice himself on her behalf if need were; no cowardly thought had crossed his soul for an instant; and he felt sure that she was as well aware of these things as he was himself. What more then, could she want? And what right had she to be vexed with him because he did not bother his head as to what became of anyone else—especially a parcel of stupid children and their teachers? He could not conceive what should have inspired her with the desire to succour such absolutely uninteresting creatures, who were no concern whatever of hers. If she had been one of the school mistresses, or monitors, or a person in any way responsible for them and liable to get into trouble if they came to grief, then it would have been a different matter altogether, and he could have understood her display of anxiety for

their welfare; but, as it was, the thing was a mystery to him.

And then, by some unlucky accident, this Sir Charles, this mere long-leggit lad, must needs be moved by the same craze, and thus secure her attention and approval. Sylvester eyed him with a sinister look as she continued to laugh and talk with the delighted baronet, whilst she would only respond coldly to his own endeavours to make himself agreeable, and be admitted to a share of her favours. It was intolerable to suppose that he, Sylvester, could be snubbed on account of a mere long-leggit lad! But before long, fortune supplied him with a means of diverting her attention from Sir Charles, and recalling it to himself.

'Excuse my interrupting you, Miss Rhys,' he said, 'but as you care about moths I want to show you one that I have found sitting on a tree close by. The insect isn't a big one, but it's very

handsome, and looks uncommon to my ignorant eyes.'

Her eagerness to see the moth made her forget that she was just then out of charity with him who had found it.

'Where is it?' she exclaimed, looking all around at the trees near. 'I don't see one anywhere.'

'No, it's a few yards to the left,' he answered. 'Come this way and I'll show it you.'

He led her to the place, and Sir Charles followed, angry at the interruption and hoping that the moth might prove as valueless as the ones that he had posted to her with such care. Consequently he was disappointed to hear her exclaim, joyfully,—

'What a little beauty! He's a *Tortrix* of some kind, though I don't know which. At any rate he's one I've not got yet. I'm so glad you found him!'

With these words she produced from

her pocket a small bottle, which she habitually carried with her, and in which there was a small piece of cotton-wool, with a few drops of chloroform on it. This bottle being carefully placed over the moth as it sat on the tree, the insect was stupefied by the fumes immediately, and borne away in triumph.

Thus the baronet's pleasure came to an end, and the offending Sylvester was restored to favour for the time, very much to the disgust of poor Sir Charles, who regarded the harmless moth almost in the light of a personal enemy. *Tortrix* indeed! He'd like to know why a *Thyatira Batis* shouldn't be as good as a *Tortrix* any day? It was bigger at any rate; and showier besides; and much the handsomest of the two, in his opinion. It was all that fellow Sylvester's luck! Directly he spotted a wretched, insignificant little moth it must needs turn out to be one she wanted; whereas when any one else found one for

her—even one covered with lovely, round pink spots—it was only laughed at, and pronounced as common as mud! Oh, it was really too bad.

Notwithstanding this *contretemps*, however, the day's events had, on the whole, been more favourable to him than he imagined. The incident of the mad dog had given Imogen the consciousness (one not disagreeable to any woman) that there were two men who would not hesitate to jeopardise themselves on her behalf, and with either of whom she would be secure against any bodily harm from which they could save her. So far both the young men were on the same footing in her mind. But then in respect of their conduct towards the children, Sir Charles had decidedly the best of it. Sylvester's behaviour to them seemed to her quite extraordinary. If he had been a coward it would have been easy enough to understand; but of his courage she entertained

no doubt, and for a brave man to act as he had done was simply inexplicable to her.

Sir Charles' actions, on the contrary, had corresponded entirely with her own ideas of what was right and proper; and she felt more than ever sure that it was impossible not to respect and admire him, and feel satisfied of his being a person eminently to be trusted—whatever one might think of him in other ways.

Thus did she review what had happened after she got home that evening. Meanwhile Sylvester, confident from what she had said that there was no likelihood of Ethel's being a spectator at the theatricals, was writing to the Crœsus-Hoggs to inform them that he should be happy to take the part that they had offered him.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE THEATRICALS.

AS the time appointed for the theatricals drew near, the public curiosity about them rose to a high pitch. A theatre had been erected for the occasion in the garden at the back of the Crœsus-Hogg's mansion, and was reported to be quite a marvel of artistic effect; the acting was to be followed by a ball, and the whole entertainment was to be even more gorgeous and magnificent than any previous ones that had ever been given there—which was saying a good deal. Invitations were sought after

eagerly, and—immense as the house was —it would evidently be crammed. The rumours as to what the affair was to cost mentioned sums that seemed incredible. There were to be acres of the rarest flowers — fountains of champagne — ice-bergs of ice — miles of delicate gauze stuffs to simulate snow and give a cool effect. What the supper would be like, no one ventured to conjecture who knew the inexhaustible fertility of Leblanc's genius. Both the actors and those before whom they were to perform—but especially the former —grew more and more excited as the eventful night approached.

It being Ethel's whim—as may be remembered—that no one should discover the identity of Miss Carton and Miss Percival till after the theatricals should be over, she did not go to rehearse as the other performers did, but studied her part at home with a most unwonted amount of industry.

Her non-appearance naturally caused a good deal of uneasiness to the Crœsus-Hoggs, who had never seen this Miss Percival whom Lady Elise had enlisted, and knew nothing of her; but Lady Elise managed to calm their anxiety—always finding some good reason or other for her friend's absence, and assuring them that she and Miss Percival had gone through their parts alone together, and that the latter was progressing famously.

On the day before the performance there was a final rehearsal which every-one, without exception, had to attend, and to this Ethel went. But she kept away from the rest as much as possible, did not stay to watch the rehearsal of the second piece (in which Sylvester appeared), and departed directly her own share in the acting was over. Owing to these precautions, and to the fact that the costume in which she acted was one that disguised her thoroughly,

she was successful in preserving her incognito.

Neither Trevor Owen nor any of the other people present who knew her, had any suspicion of who she was; and it thus happened also that she never saw anything of Sylvester, who did not act in the same piece as herself.

And now at last the important time had come. The theatre was filling rapidly; some of the actors were beginning to feel qualms of nervousness that made them wish earnestly the night were over, and themselves well out of what they had undertaken; and the quantity of champagne that became imperatively necessary in the green-room was something positively alarming.

In due course arrived, amongst the other guests, Mr Rhys and Imogen—the latter in a rather mixed state of mind, as she was divided between displeasure at being there at all, and natural

enjoyment of the party and all the fun going on. She would like the ball after the theatricals, as she loved dancing, and knew that plenty of her regular partners would be there. The acting might very possibly be less amusing, she thought; but then of course it gained greatly in interest by the circumstance that two people whom she knew as well as she did Ethel and Sylvester were to take part in it. She had some curiosity, too, to see how the other actors would acquit themselves, and what the whole affair would be like, so that altogether there certainly seemed to be a reasonable prospect of her spending a pleasant evening.

But then against these arguments in favour of her present position, was to be set the disagreeable thought that she was being in a way humiliated by receiving hospitality from people against whom she was prejudiced as ineffable snobs and outer barbarians. The mercenary spirit that

admitted such people, merely because they had money, to associate with ladies and gentlemen, seemed mean and disgraceful to her hot-headed youth. To be present at this entertainment was evidently giving countenance and encouragement to that objectionable mercenariness, and therefore she had an internal conviction that she and all the people about her ought to feel ashamed of themselves. What made the situation additionally galling, was to recollect how openly she had declared her opinions on this subject, and how resolutely she had made up her mind to avoid making the acquaintance of these Crœsus-Hoggs. Yet here she was after all; and it was in the power of anyone to twit her with her sudden change of views, and to suppose that she too had been affected by the mercenary considerations that she had hitherto condemned! Oh, it was *too* bad of papa ever to have made friends with that old woman! If only he had kept her

at a distance instead of being pleasant and chatty all through that dinner to which he had taken her down, then Imogen need never have had anything to do with these dreadful people whose acquaintance was such an offence to her juvenile sentiments of exclusiveness and indignation at whatever was mercenary!

It was, however, to be remembered that her being there was no doing of her own, and that she would not have come if her father had not insisted on it. There was some comfort in this thought, and it enabled her to feel that her conscience was sufficiently clear to allow of her getting as much amusement as she could out of all the events of the evening. Consequently there was a rather mischievous twinkle in her eye that betrayed her readiness to make the most of any opportunity that might occur to pick holes in the Crœsus-Hoggs, their house, arrangements, and style of doing things. As, on her father's

arm, she proceeded through the corridors and saloons to the theatre, she unconsciously expressed her disapproving and protesting condition by carrying her head a little further back, and her nose a little higher in the air than usual.

This unwontedly stiff bearing presented a ludicrous contrast to that of her father, who never for a moment dreamt of troubling himself as to the amount of right his entertainers might have to their social position, and was in a thoroughly contented frame of mind, intending to enjoy himself, and nodding, smiling, and how-do-you-doing with sociable vigour, to whatever acquaintances he saw in the throng.

At the entrance to the theatre stood Sir Charles Dover, watching for the arrival of the Rhys' as the most interesting event of the evening to him. His hopes had been reviving considerably recently, as at several balls where he had met Imogen since the day of the adventure with the

mad dog, she had not only danced with him more than she had done for some time past, but had even sat out a dance with him once or twice. The exaltation of spirits caused by this amount of condescension had not been altogether quenched even by the damping reflection that that brute Sylvester had had quite as much favour shown him on the same or other occasions. Provoking as this was, yet the baronet derived some comfort from the thought that any marks of encouragement vouchsafed to a man whom she *knew* to want to marry her, must certainly mean more than they would do in any other case; and whereas, he, Sir Charles, had spoken out plainly and told her what he wanted; he did not for a moment believe that that other fellow had done anything of the sort, so that the chances were she was quite ignorant of his intentions—if he had any.

Be that as it might, however, Sir Charles

had looked forward cheerfully to the theatricals. Whilst they lasted, Sylvester would be out of the way on the stage at all events, and there would be a chance for someone else to make the running without being interfered with; so Sir Charles meant to make the most of the opportunity that night, and had come early and waited patiently in hopes of being able to sit next his lady love in the theatre. Her unusual haughtiness of demeanour as she entered was a little alarming at first sight; but he speedily regained his equanimity on perceiving that he, at all events, was not the object of her displeasure. Her face relaxed visibly as she recognised him; he even fancied that he detected a momentary gleam of pleasure in it—yet then again he feared that was but a fancy—probably merely the effect of some reflection from the brilliant lights that glittered in all directions, and no solid source of happiness.

But at any rate she spoke to him quite graciously enough to encourage him to follow her to her place, and seat himself next her tentatively with a casual, no-intention-of-remaining-permanently sort of air, which would make it easy for him subsequently to betake himself elsewhere, if she should show signs of preferring his room to his company.

No such signs, however, did she show; but rather the contrary, for she said as he took his seat, 'Are you going to establish yourself there? That's all right, for I want some one to help keep an empty place by us for a lady who won't be here till presently. I promised I'd do it if I could, and you'll help, won't you?'

'Certainly,' answered Sir Charles; 'shall I bandage one of my legs with a handkerchief, stick it up on the empty chair, and assure anyone who wants to sit there, that I have a broken leg which must on no account be let to hang down?'

She laughed.

'No, I don't think you need quite do that,' she answered; 'but you must sit as big as you can, and spread yourself out well. When you and I and papa all do that, it'll be odd if we don't manage to hide away a fourth seat somewhere or other amongst us.'

'Very good,' returned Sir Charles. 'I'll do my best to assist you, regardless of the violence that I shall thereby do to my feelings of justice, though, certainly, you are about the last person whom I should have expected to ask such a thing of me.'

'Why? Where's the injustice?' she asked.

'To an unknown individual in the audience,' was his reply. 'Consider that if you succeed in your unlawfully secretive purpose, some unfortunate mortal will be doomed to stand who need not otherwise have done so. Really, I'm quite surprised at you! I did not think you could have been so unkind.'

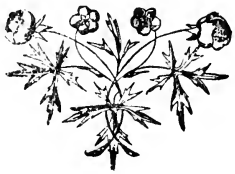
This attack upon the morality of her proceedings was whimsical no doubt, yet not wholly without reason. But she was ready with her defence.

'Oh,' she rejoined promptly; 'but then against the discomfort of that one person, you must put the advantage that all the rest of the audience will gain by having more air. A person less will give them ever so much extra, you know—what with the extra space for it to occupy, and the quantity that another set of lungs would have consumed, and that will now be at the disposal of everyone else. Even if one individual should be a little uncomfortable in consequence of our conduct, yet a great many people will be much better off for it, don't you see? and of course we should always consider the good of the greatest number.'

'I'm convinced by your argument,' returned the baronet, 'and now, please, show me how to spread myself out and

look big, in order that I may obey your behests.'

It need scarcely be remarked that after this he felt no hesitation about retaining the position which he had taken up by her side.



## CHAPTER VII.

### RECOGNITION.

THE theatre was crowded, and numbers of people who could not be contained within it, had to content themselves with wandering about in the great house instead, and admiring its superb appointments, size, and magnificence, till the acting should be over and the ball should begin. But Imogen was successful in reserving a spare place for Ethel to occupy, notwithstanding the crowd.

The bell rang, the curtain rose, and the

first play commenced. In this the hero and nominal heroine were represented respectively by Guelph Crœsus-Hogg and Lady Elise Bolyn. The chief interest of the piece, however, was by no means confined to these two; for the female part, that afforded most scope for fine acting, and was altogether of most real importance to the piece, was that of a hard, worldly, crafty, scheming adventuress, whose sole redeeming point lay in her passionate love for a good-for-nothing son, who repaid her affection with cruel ingratitude and baseness. The part of this sinned-against and sinning mother had been given to Ethel, who, stimulated to unaccustomed energy by the fancy that had seized her to discover for once what sort of verdict she could obtain for herself when unsupported by her heiress-ship, had thrown herself completely into the character, studied it carefully, and bestowed on it a good deal

more labour than she was in the habit of giving to anything. By dint of this, joined to the strong turn for acting which she possessed naturally, she achieved an unmistakable success, stirring up people's emotions in spite of themselves, and surprising even the most *blasé* of the audience into an unexpected thrill of sympathy and interest. The host and hostess were besieged with inquiries as to who Miss Percival was? To all of which they could only reply that they had no personal knowledge of her, but that they had an ample guarantee of her being all that was desirable, inasmuch as she was a friend of the charming Lady Elise Bolyn, who had persuaded her to undertake the part, and made herself entirely responsible for her.

Imogen's affectionate admiration for her cousin made her rejoice as heartily at this success as if it had been her own; but it cannot be said that she was able

at that moment to give her mind to it as thoroughly as she would have wished; for her attention was being distracted from her immediate surroundings by a moth that had got into the theatre, and was flying round and round the lights, high up out of reach.

Wherever the insect went, her eyes followed it involuntarily, and Sir Charles had no difficulty in guessing what was passing through her mind, as he saw the wistful looks she turned upwards from time to time whilst answering the remarks of some people she knew who began to talk to her after the first play was over. The species and nature of that moth was evidently the one question of really paramount interest to her for the time being, and he took the first opportunity, when she was not engaged with anyone else, of answering her unspoken thoughts.

'You needn't excite yourself about it,' he remarked quietly, with the air of one

who thoroughly understands what he is talking about; 'it's only a *Thyatira Batis*.'

The observation was so *à propos* to what she was thinking about, that for a moment she forgot the entomological ignorance of the speaker, and the two moths that he had sent her.

'Oh no! indeed I don't think it can be,' she said eagerly. 'I'm almost sure the wings are too long and narrow, and—'

Here she suddenly recollected herself, and paused, looking a little shy.

'What do you know about *Thyatira Batis?*' she asked.

'A little bird has told me all about them,' returned he; 'I know that they're mere worthless rubbish. I know what sort of reception they met with when some one sent them to a certain young lady, and what an uncommon fool the sender was deemed for his pains.'

It was the first time that he had ever mentioned the subject to her, and though he tried to appear as if he were only chaffing, there was a shade of annoyance in his voice that smote her with compunction.

'No, *indeed* he wasn't,' she said earnestly; 'she thought it very kind of him to have taken so much trouble about catching, killing, setting, and packing them for her.'

'Oh, no doubt she got some gratification out of the present, for at any rate she could laugh at his stupidity in having bothered himself like that about things that she would only throw into the fire. It's always amusing to see people show their ignorance!'

'She *didn't* throw them into the fire,' said Imogen, with a slight blush.

'Well, into the waste-paper basket then,' returned he.

'She didn't throw them into the waste-paper basket either.'

'I suppose the fact is that by this time

she doesn't the least know what she *did* do with them,' observed he.

'Yes, she does.'

'What was it then?'

Imogen did not answer for a moment, and then said,—

'Oh, look! there's the moth has found his way to get out at last.'

'So he has. Miss Rhys, are you going to tell me what you did with that brace of moths you got by post one fine day?'

'Why — what did you suppose when you sent them would be done with them?' replied she, hesitating a little in her answer, and feeling as if she were called upon to make the best of a thing which she ought perhaps to be ashamed of.

'There had seemed to me a possibility that they might be thought acceptable and kept.'

'Well, and so they were kept. One generally does keep a thing that someone

has had a lot of bother about getting for one; doesn't one?'

That his present should have been treated with this amount of respect was a blissful and unexpected hearing to Sir Charles; but before he could reply, the conversation was interrupted by the advent of Ethel, who having resumed an ordinary evening costume and come round unnoticed to the front of the theatre, had made her way to the Rhys' to take possession of the seat they had reserved for her. Now that the object for which she had for once chosen to exert herself was accomplished, she was relapsing speedily into her normal condition of indolence.

The admiring comments upon Miss Percival's acting which she heard on all sides as she passed through the crowd, assured her of having achieved a success; and she would have been more than human if she had not felt a great and genuine gratification at the sensation which she perceived

she had been able to create as an unknown individual. Yet all the time there seemed to be present in her mind a consciousness of '*Le jeu ne vant pas la chandelle.*' In her secret soul she doubted whether the satisfaction were enough to repay the trouble it had cost her to earn it; whether the best part of the whole affair were not the having got it over; and whether it could ever be worth while to do anything one was not absolutely obliged to do.

Then the second play began. The heroine of this was a sighing, love-lorn damsel who was impersonated by Guinevere Crœsus-Hogg. The part was one for which she was in no wise well adapted, either by appearance or natural talent, inasmuch as she was a large-boned, buxom, jovial-looking, young woman who excelled in broad comedy. But as few people have the sense to limit themselves to what they understand and can do, therefore it had come to pass that nothing would please

her save trying her hand at a highly sentimental and romantic part. That sort of thing should, in her opinion, be played with much turning-up of the eyes, sighing, shaking of the head, and languishing; and to this conception of the part she kept true pretty steadily, except once or twice when she forgot herself for an instant and indulged in some familiar gesture of the broadly comic kind—even going so far on one occasion as to give a prolonged and ostentatious wink at her lover!

Altogether, therefore, her representation of the heroine was a somewhat incongruous one, both ideally and in appearance. The hero, her lover, was played by Trevor Owen. His barristerial practice had given him enough self-confidence, facial control, and power of pretending to be in earnest when he was not, to make him a fair mediocre actor, though he had not got it in him ever to rise higher than that in the histrionic line. The theatrical

manager had perceived that with two leading performers of this calibre, it was evidently prudent that there should be some one strong in the caste supporting them, so as to cause any little shortcomings that might occur in the chief parts to be overlooked; consequently, Lady George Quaver, with her magnificent voice, had been secured for one of the parts which had a song in it; and Mr Sylvester—who was reputed a first-rate actor, quite as good as a professional according to some people—was to represent the villain of the piece. On this individual much of the interest centred; amongst other things it fell to his lot to be mortally offended by the heroine in the first act, and to plan out a scheme of desperate vengeance, for the execution of which it was necessary in a subsequent act that he should join a gang of poachers, and pretend to be one of themselves. At this point, in order the more

thoroughly to play his part, he rashly assumed just the same coarse speech, accent, and tone of a man belonging to the lower orders, as he had previously done in committing the burglary. Had he had an idea of the possibility of Ethel's presence, he would, of course, never have been guilty of such imprudence; but he believed himself to have ascertained with certainty that she would not be there, and imagined, therefore, that he might, with perfect safety, do what he liked to heighten the effect of his acting, and display his talents more fully.

At his earlier appearances in the play, Ethel watched him without any particular feeling of recognition, beyond a vague idea that she had heard his voice, or one very like it, somewhere or other before; but when he came on disguised as a poacher, and began to speak in his disguised voice, it was a very different matter. For a minute or so she listened

to him with a queer, nightmare sort of sensation, wondering what disagreeable association had suddenly begun to press upon her memory, and clamour importunately to be given a definite form and name. Then all at once the truth flashed upon her, and she knew where she had seen that actor before. Voice, manner, accent, hand with a finger missing—the part he was playing of a ruffian to be dreaded—all recalled to mind her burglar exactly, and she felt, beyond all possibility of doubt, that the very man himself was there before her!

Full of horror and astonishment at this discovery, she was just about to impart it to Imogen, who was sitting next her, when she suddenly recollected the rumours she had heard in relation to her cousin and Mr Sylvester, and checked herself. What if there should be any foundation for those rumours? What if her cousin's affections were really set upon this man? Terrible as

such a misfortune would be, Ethel could not shut her eyes to its being a possible contingency, and therefore it behoved her to act with caution, so that in case of the worst, Imogen's feelings should be saved as much as might be. Under the circumstances, to blurt out to her the appalling truth concerning Sylvester in a public place like this, would be a most brutal and injudicious proceeding she thought, and the very last thing that ought to be done!

It has been already said that Imogen's romantic attachment to Ethel was a one-sided affair, and that the latter had no idea of its existence. But though she did not reciprocate an affection of which she was ignorant, she nevertheless liked her cousin much, and had a very friendly feeling for her, and this—joined to her natural kindliness of disposition—made it impossible for her to contemplate the distress that seemed to her to be but too probably

awaiting the girl, without taking it greatly to heart. She would have given worlds to be sure that Sylvester was nothing to Imogen. Certain knowledge of any kind as to how matters stood between the two would be of the utmost assistance in determining her as to what steps she should take in the present emergency. She felt it was most important to her to know whether Imogen liked him or not, and yet, unluckily, the state of her cousin's affections was a matter as to which she was profoundly ignorant. She knew that Sylvester had been a good deal in her company of late, and that people said something was to come of it—and that was all she did know; whether or not he had really succeeded in making any impression she had not an idea. Even Sir Charles himself (with the recently-acquired consolation of knowing that his *Thyatira Batis* had not been thrown away) was not at that moment more anxious as to what

might be to be read in Imogen's heart, than was Ethel, as she sat watching the performance. Though outwardly as quiet and placid as usual, she was inwardly more worried than any one would have supposed it possible for her tranquil nature to be, as she perplexed herself to no purpose, in endeavouring to discover what she ought to do.

Perhaps she could find out something to give her a clue, even at this eleventh hour, to what she was so anxious to know. With that view she addressed fishing questions as to Imogen's opinions regarding the merits of the various performers, and especially of Sylvester's. But there was nothing in the smallest degree definite or satisfactory to be arrived at by that means. Then she watched her cousin narrowly to see if she could detect any special signs of interest when he was on the stage. But that attempt was as unsuccessful as the other. So Ethel fell back

in despair on her memory for assistance—trying to recall whatever she had ever heard or seen that could guide her to the information she wanted. The more she reflected upon the subject, the more inclined she became to believe that her cousin really did care about the man. Various mere trifles that she remembered, assumed unnaturally large proportions in her present state of anxiety, and appeared significant circumstances. Words, tones, looks, that had been absolutely unmeaning were distorted by her fear into the very shape which she dreaded their wearing. The more horrible did it appear to suppose that Imogen could have given him her heart, so much the more probable did it appear also. And in her distress at the possibility of such a thing, she did not notice how very slight was the basis on which she was founding her conjecture. Then there was another question also to be considered in regard to this business

and that was: who ought first to be told of the unpleasant discovery that she had made? there could be no doubt that she ought to announce it without loss of time, and she must make up her mind to whom the announcement was to be made. Perhaps to one of her uncles, as being her nearest relatives; or perhaps to Mr Trevor Owen, who had appeared for her when the case had been tried? She had a kind of idea that it was due to society that it should be immediately put upon its guard against the villain in its midst, and that therefore she ought to reveal his true nature there and then.

But then there was Imogen to be considered. Should she keep silence till she could have an opportunity for seeing the girl alone, and making a grand, final effort to find out whether or no Sylvester had contrived to insinuate himself into her affections? If not, then everything would be easy enough. But supposing—miserable

possibility that it was!—supposing the contrary, and that she should have been so unfortunate as to fall in love with him, what would Ethel do then? Would there not be laid upon her the direful necessity of breaking to Imogen that she had set her heart upon a scoundrel? and would not that be as odious a task as could easily be imagined?

It seemed to Ethel that a terrible calamity was about, through her means, to descend upon her cousin; and then she began endeavouring to think of some way of mitigating it. If only Ethel could accomplish that, she felt that she would willingly surrender the punishment of the man who had robbed her, and all chance of ever recovering her precious jewels again also. Would it soften the blow, she wondered, if she were to offer Imogen to let him have time to get out of England before she gave any information against him? What a pity it was that she could

not conscientiously let the whole matter alone and say nothing about it! The loss of the jewels was but a trifling ill compared to these bothers and perplexities that now distracted her and from which she saw no escape.

But there was no blinking the fact that it was her clear duty to unmask this detestable thief and hypocrite who enjoyed public esteem and confidence; who passed everywhere for an honest, upright, trustworthy man; and whose employers had placed him in a position given only to people of the strictest integrity. Besides, it would be no true kindness to let Imogen remain in ignorance of his real character and be perhaps led on to love him in course of time even if she did not do so already.

No! there was evidently no possibility of shirking the impending fuss and unpleasantness with a clear conscience—which was just the thing that sometimes

made it so awkward to have a conscience at all, as Ethel could not help reflecting with a quaint, half-humorous ruefulness. Ah! why had she not stuck to her favourite policy of masterly inaction, she thought dolefully. Then she would never have got mixed up with these theatricals which had first interfered with the tranquillity she loved by stirring her up to work hard at learning her part, and now, by revealing to her who Sylvester was, threatened to lead her into a fresh and far more disagreeable state of commotion. It would have been so much better to have let the acting alone altogether!

## CHAPTER VIII.

### ETHEL AND SYLVESTER.

ETHEL was still in this unsettled state of mind, and unable to resolve what she had better do, when the acting came to an end, and a general move was made to leave the theatre, and go back to the house, where dancing was now to take place. Mr Rhys offered his arm to his niece to conduct her to the ball-rooms, and Sir Charles followed with Imogen, whose hand he had secured for the first dance.

As they traversed the garden between the theatre and the mansion, a sudden

impulse moved Ethel, whose habitual placidity was not so imperturbable as not to be now and then disturbed by some unexpected freak of fancy. She would stand face to face with Sylvester herself—would speak once more with this villain whom she had had to do with before in such a very different situation, and whom it was impossible to think of without aversion. Her uncle knew the man, and he should help her to carry out her intention.

'You know Mr Sylvester pretty well, don't you, Uncle Rhys?' she said. 'What sort of a person do you consider him to be?'

'Sylvester—eh?' returned Mr Rhys; 'oh, he's a very clever, go-a-head, young fellow, in my opinion. Just the sort of man who doesn't do a thing at all, unless he does it well. He'll always be either first or nowhere. Didn't he act capitally to-night?'

'Yes, no doubt he did,' answered Ethel.

'But I've never been introduced to him, and I'm curious as to what he's like when one talks to him. So I want you to introduce him to me by-and-by, when he comes round from the stage in the guise of an ordinary mortal again. Will you?'

'Introduce him to you?' replied her uncle; 'be delighted to, if you'll give me a chance of doing it; but mostly there's no getting near you young ladies when once you begin dancing—it's one partner after another all night long—I'm sure when I take Imogen to a ball, I hardly ever set eyes on her from the time we get into the room till the time we leave it. 'Pon my word, there she is gone off to dance with Sir Charles already! What the skin of her toes can be made of, I can't think—*mine* would be all blisters with a quarter the work, I know.'

'Ah! but then I'm older and more sedate then she is,' returned Ethel, laughing, 'and you may rely that I will be within reach

presently for you to introduce me to Mr Sylvester. However, I must go now, for I am engaged for this dance, and here's my partner coming to fetch me.'

Sylvester was, on that night, in a moody, unhappy frame of mind, which had recently often affected him, and was out of spirits notwithstanding the numerous congratulations and compliments he received on his acting. Under any circumstances, he would have done that well, for in whatever he undertook he despised mediocrity and failure as unworthy of him, and was certain to have been successful even without the extra stimulus which Imogen's presence had supplied on the present occasion—the stimulus of desiring to show her what he could do, and make her think well of him if possible.

What tormented and depressed him was this. Whilst an ardent, intense desire to please her was more and more taking possession of him, at the same time he

felt also a constantly increasing doubt as to whether it was within the bounds of possibility that he should ever be able to do so. He knew that he had talent and strength for her to admire—but what was the good of that if she were perverse enough to prefer virtue—which article it was certainly not in his power to offer? That she *did* prefer virtue—that her nature was one that was not to be contented without it—was a conviction which impressed itself more and more strongly on his mind every time he saw her, and vexed him almost past bearing. It must be *that* that made her want to help other people, be they who they might, and made her take to heart injustice and wrong of all kinds. Hence it was that she had been so anxious to clear Richard Richards from the false accusation brought against him—on which subject she had discoursed so much that Sylvester, in his mad longing to please

her, had once thought wildly even whether he would not sacrifice himself for her contentment by making known who the real culprit was. The idea had been promptly dismissed as preposterous and nothing had come of it; yet when not long afterwards he had heard her quote her favourite—

> 'Tasks in hours of insight willed,
> May be through hours of gloom fulfilled,'

he had been conscious of a passing wonder whether she would have regarded as an 'hour of insight,' the romantic possibility of self-condemnation that had crossed his brain for a moment She had subjugated him so completely that he felt as if he could hardly oppose her will in anything, and as if it were even imperatively necessary for him to conform himself to whatever standard of morality pleased her. But how was that possible unless he could undo the past, and alter his whole self? As George Eliot says,—

'You can't turn curds to milk again,
Nor now, by wishing, back to then.'

And yet was there not, perhaps, some remote chance that he might even yet become such as she would approve of, if only he could have her presence always with him?

When the acting was over and he had changed his things, he went to the ball-rooms and looked round for her who was to him the only one human being worth considering besides himself in the world. He wanted to have the bliss of dancing with her again and to be able, for that brief space at least, to give himself up to the present enjoyment and forget all irritating subjects. Forcing his way with difficulty from one to another of the crowded rooms he searched for her for some time in vain. At last, however, he spied her sitting in a small, flower-decked boudoir alone with Sir Charles Dover, with whom she appeared

to be carrying on a very interesting conversation. Neither of them saw Sylvester, who watched them for a minute full of angry disappointment at finding her thus engaged, and debated whether to go and interrupt the *tête-à-tête* or not. Jealousy prompted him to do so; but he was withheld by the melancholy forebodings that filled him of the futility of his passion. Supposing he chose to look upon himself as the representative of talent, then Sir Charles might fairly be considered to be that of virtue. And if she would persist in liking virtue best, what chance of success was there for talent if it could not compass the other attribute also?

Anyhow he would in no wise advance his cause by disturbing her at present, and he must put off till later in the evening the dance with her on which his heart was set. Therefore he retired from the room noiselessly, and, retracing his steps

to the place where he had seen that Mr Rhys was standing, stationed himself in the vicinity of that gentleman to await her re-appearance.

Here he was quickly perceived by Ethel. She was still of the same mind about desiring to have an interview with him, in spite of the horror and almost fear with which he had inspired her. He certainly could not do her any harm here, in the midst of this throng of people ; and it was now a favourable opportunity for carrying out her plan. So she pointed him out to her uncle, and suggested that the latter should at once perform the promised introduction.

Mr Rhys bustled off immediately to execute her wishes.

'Come along, Sylvester,' he said. 'I see you're not dancing, and I want to introduce you to a partner. One, too, who'll be envied you by half the men in the room. Lucky fellow, you are, that's she

taken a fancy to dance with you! You know her well enough by name; everyone does that, I think, since she had half her jewels stolen when she was staying with me last September. It's my niece, Miss Carton.'

No more unwelcome name could possibly have passed Mr Rhys' lips.

'Miss Carton!' exclaimed Sylvester, with a feeling of overwhelming and unpleasant surprise. 'Why, I fancied she did not know the Crœsus-Hoggs, and would certainly not be here to-night.'

'Oh dear no!—how can you have made such a mistake?' replied Mr Rhys genially; there she's been this ever so long, admiring your acting like all the rest of us, and declaring it to be capital. Indeed, there couldn't be two opinions about that. However, come along, and be introduced—there she is sitting by the pillar of yellow roses.'

There was no escaping the ordeal. As

he was led up towards Ethel, Sylvester swiftly reviewed his acting of the poacher an hour or so ago, and compared it with his performance of the burglar at Llwyn-yr-Allt last September. The entire similarity of the two assumptions of character made him shiver, and he hardly ventured to hope that she could have failed to know him again; still, there was just a chance of it, for it was wonderful how unobservant some people were. But this hope was destroyed when he reached her, and asked her to dance. In her unwontedly excited condition of mind, she was unable wholly to control the expression of her face; and though outsiders, who had no clue to its meaning would not have been able to read what was written there, yet in his eyes recognition of him, and hostility were visible too plainly to be mistaken.

What was to come next? he wondered, internally. Truly their relative positions

were completely reversed from what they had been at his former meeting with her. Then he had had the upper hand, but now it was her turn to dictate to him. She could talk to him, dance with him, keep him at her side, do with him exactly as she chose; he dared not resist or try to slip away lest she should call out stop thief! and have him arrested on the spot.

She accepted his invitation to dance, and bowing politely, he presented his arm to lead her away just as he might have done to any other lady in the room. It was a strange sensation to her to realise that this was the same person who had put her in fear of her life a few months before; and to think that out of all the crowd of people around, she alone knew the villainy of which this seemingly respectable and worthy young gentleman was capable; she alone knew how dangerous a monster was in the midst of them, in an innocent, fleecy covering to make

him look like the rest of the flock. She felt an involuntary thrill as she laid her hand on the proffered coat sleeve, and for the moment almost repented of her whim to be introduced to him. What she wanted or expected to gain thereby she would have been puzzled to say exactly. Had she been questioned on the matter she would probably have replied that she had fancied, perhaps, she might find it easier to settle what to do, when she had some personal knowledge of what he was like.

The fact was she had been moved partly by curiosity, partly by sudden caprice, and partly by a peculiarity to which some natures are liable, and which, when a situation occurs so extraordinary as to render it impossible to discover any guiding landmarks of precedent, will sometimes make even the most well regulated, Mrs-Grundy-ridden of females give herself up recklessly to follow the fancy of

the moment, and resolve, as it were, to have a sudden frolic for once, and see what comes of it. But an idea of that kind never occurred to Sylvester, who, little used to feminine caprices, forgot to take their likelihood into account, and was consequently extremely puzzled as to what could possibly be Ethel's object in her present proceeding.

He felt that she was master of the situation entirely, and that he had no choice but to obey her pleasure, and wait and see what she intended to do. But what that would be he was burning to know.

In one respect she was out in her calculations, however. That he was sure to fear her recognising him she was quite aware; but she did not mean to let him know that she had really done so just yet, as she did not want him to be frightened away before she could determine her plan of action, and choose when

to have him arrested. But she had forgotten the possibility of her face betraying her, and therefore he had the advantage of a fuller knowledge of how matters stood between them than she had reckoned on.

It was not dancing with him, but conversation that she desired ; so after taking one short turn in the valse that had just commenced, she declared it was too full for there to be any satisfaction in attempting to dance then, and that, as she was a little tired, she should prefer finding a cool place to sit down in. Accordingly, Sylvester obediently took her to one of the smaller rooms. Here there was an alcove, in which was a window, with a luxuriously-cushioned settee, affording just room for two people to sit down comfortably. The superb, delicately-scented flowers surrounding it were stirred lightly by the soft night breeze coming in through the open window, on the sill of which stood a large block of

ice, cooling every breath of air as it entered; and in this comfortable nook the oddly-matched pair—mutually fearing and detesting one another—seated themselves as though on the best of terms together, and were commented on by an irreverent Eton boy as 'a couple of beggars going to spoon; don't disturb the poor coves.'

They had but just sat down when Sir Charles and Imogen came in on their way to the ball-room and caught sight of them. There was a new look of elation and hope in Sir Charles' face, as though he saw a prospect of great happiness very near at hand, which gave Sylvester a sharp pain at heart. Of course, now that all was about to be revealed, and he was going to be arrested for robbery, there would be no more chance for *him* with Imogen, he thought; but it was none the less bitter to have to witness the triumph of someone else, and to reflect that talent had

been beaten by virtue upon equal terms, and even before the former had been handicapped by the bringing to light of its past iniquities. And yet he loved her so! No one could love her better, he felt sure. And his love grew yet fiercer and more painful now that prison walls seemed about to shut him out from her hopelessly.

'So you two have actually made acquaintance at last!' cried Imogen, stopping for a moment, and coming towards the couple in the window-seat. 'And you've accomplished it without my assistance after all! Well, I'm delighted the spell has been broken, for I really began to think that there must be a fate about the way in which I invariably failed to bring you together. But do you mean to say your going to sit still during the *Manola?* *We* aren't at any rate, so good-bye for the present.'

And so saying she and her cavalier passed swiftly on to join the dancers.

'Certainly it is no fault of hers that we have not met before, for she was very anxious to introduce us to one another, I know, only there was always something or other in the way,' began Ethel, with a vague idea that it would be a good thing to lead the conversation to the subject of Imogen as a preliminary to finding out something about the state of affairs existing between her cousin and Sylvester.

The latter hesitated for a moment. He was quite positive of Miss Carton's having recognised him; there were no witnesses, so that whatever admission he might now make would not tell against him hereafter in a court of justice, as it would be easy to deny it all then if needs be; and he was consumed with anxiety to know what plan she had in her mind in regard to his fate. What, therefore, was the good of wasting time in mere empty fencing?

'It pleases you to speak as though this

were our first meeting, Miss Carton,' said he, 'and all the better for me if it were so indeed! Yet I can hardly believe that the one occasion when we met before has escaped your memory so readily.'

Ethel was somewhat taken aback at this frankness, and it needed all her self-control to prevent her betraying her discomposure to her antagonist.

'You are right; I have not forgotten it,' she replied calmly. 'But how did you know that I had recognised you?'

'By your face,' he answered; 'I read it there the moment you looked at me when your uncle introduced us; but of course I knew you could hardly help doing it after seeing me play that cursed poaching part just now, which you may be very sure I would not have done unless I had believed your absence a matter of certainty. And so now that we can speak openly, will you condescend to tell me what you intend to do?'

'What do you expect that I should do?' she inquired with some haughtiness.

'Give me up to the police.'

'You are perfectly correct in your supposition.'

He laughed bitterly.

'And perhaps also you will be so gracious as to inform me how many more minutes of liberty you intend that I should enjoy first?' he inquired.

Ethel now fully realised the mistake she had made in letting her recognition of him be apparent. Her liberty of action was to some extent fettered by this premature showing of her hand. No doubt he would hurry off and make his escape immediately if she let him leave her before she had given him into custody; therefore she was no longer free to do as she had originally intended, and to postpone his denunciation till such time as it should be most convenient to herself.

Ah, if only she could know whether or not

there was any kind of understanding or affection subsisting between him and Imogen! She would see if she could not discover something then and there by questioning him as to this most important matter.

'That depends,' she returned cautiously; 'of course I do not wish to behave with any needless harshness. It has been rumoured that—that—in short that you have an affection for Miss Rhys, and it occurred to me that in that case it would be kinder on my part to endeavour to spare the feelings of both you and her by contriving so that your arrest should not take place under her very eyes. Perhaps, however, the rumour to which I allude is false?'

Though despairing, miserable, half-maddened by the utter downfall of all his hopes that was impending, he felt no wish to deny or seem ashamed of his adoration for Imogen. Rather it gave him a sudden sense of pleasure to be able

to acknowledge what bore testimony to her supreme excellence and power.

'No, it is not,' he replied, almost defiantly; 'I care more for her than for the whole of the rest of the world together.'

Ethel was surprised and a little bit moved at this abrupt and evidently genuine confession of love; it was impossible not to feel some slight compassion for the man who had been driven to make it.

'Does my cousin know this?' she said, speaking somewhat more gently than before.

'No; I have never told her of it.'

'Do you think it likely that she suspects it, though?' continued Ethel, anxious to profit as much as she could by his unexpectedly confidential humour; 'or should you say there was any disposition on her part to reciprocate your attachment?'

'How can I tell? But no, I fear not.'

He paused. Never before had he spoken to another person of that love which

was the one thing good, true, and honest about him. Now that he had begun to do so, when already excited and overwrought both by the discovery of his fatal secret, and also by the conviction that Imogen was being won by his rival, the violence of repressed emotion at last let loose, broke down his habitual self-control, and carried him on in spite of himself; he forgot the position in which he stood, the ruin that was threatening him, and felt only an unconquerable impulse to try for once in his life to impart to a second person something of the real heart and soul within him.

Ethel's knowledge of his being a criminal made it easier to unbosom himself to her than to anyone else; and after hesitating for a moment he went on again, speaking with a passionate intensity of feeling that made his voice tremble in spite of all he could do to control it, and that fairly startled his hearer.

'I said that I *feared* I was nothing to her. Yet why should I fear it, seeing things are as they are? You at least, knowing what you do, are able to perceive that hidden incompatibility between her and me which has been a barrier rising up again and again to hinder me from paying court to her as another man might have done. Ah! the barrier will not be a hidden one much longer. She, and the whole world too, must see it plainly the instant that it pleases you to draw back the veil now concealing it. But *I* have known it always. Look at the utter dissimilarity between her nature and mine—she, good and innocent, with her heart set on being of use in the world, full of all kinds of noble and elevated aims (or what the world calls such at any rate), and thinking that every fellow-creature has a claim upon her; whereas I—! Why, before I knew her, I neither cared for nor believed

in any goodness at all. And though now I have grown so to love her that I can no longer remain wholly indifferent to or incredulous about anything that she holds in honour—anything that is inseparable from herself—yet still I *cannot* change my nature, I *cannot* cancel the past, I *cannot* make myself such as she approves. What chance then is there that she would care for me if she knew what I really am? I could never hope for such happiness—never—never!'

It was not in Ethel to listen to this outburst of long-pent-up strong love and misery finding vent in words at last, without being touched by it. The power which the man possessed came out in his great emotion to its full extent, and she, like Imogen, became vaguely aware that there was something singular about him, and that either to attract or to repel he had a faculty that was peculiar to himself. Her compassion was aroused for his suffer-

ings, and tended to mitigate the extreme aversion she had felt for him at first. However evil he might be he was surely not irredeemable; and her immediate instinct was to help him by trying to turn his mind in the direction where she knew she would herself find hope and comfort in whatever trouble might come upon her.

'It is true that you cannot alter the past,' she said, speaking very gently and pityingly; 'but yet you can alter yourself, if you will. Do you not know how gracious our Father is to all who turn, and repent of the evil they have done? Have you not any kind of religion or religious faith at all?'

On no lesser occasion could she have spoken thus openly about religion to a stranger. But ordinary habits both of thought and speech are sometimes discarded on great emergencies, and the man's startling and terrible earnestness made her feel instinctively the necessity of

being utterly real just then—of saying out the true thing within her, be it what it might. As for Sylvester, having begun to come out of his shell he could not immediately force himself back to it again, for he experienced a strange sense of relief in thus revealing himself for once as he really was to another person. He replied with the same abrupt straightforwardness as before :—

'Some time ago I should have answered "No!" to that question unhesitatingly; but now I am less positive about it than I was. Possibly some stray glimmers of light may have reached me by means of your cousin—though whether, if so, they came *from* or *through* her I cannot say. She may have been the sun whence they issued, or else perchance but the pane of glass that admitted them into a dark room —how can I tell?'

Ethel leant her head upon her hand and mused. The duty of unmasking Sylvester

had at first seemed specially hateful to her on account of Imogen only; but now she was beginning to dislike it on his own account also. The unreserve with which he had shown her what was passing in his mind had not resulted from any deep laid plan for appealing to her feelings; he had, for the moment, forgotten himself too entirely to have any thought of that kind. Yet such an appeal, no doubt, was the effect that his outspokenness produced upon her. It would have taken a far harder heart than that of Ethel to listen to him unmoved; and the more interested in him she became, the harder she found it to decide upon what course of action to pursue. She had an inkling that his nature was one of those that need much sorrow to make them learn—to whom the purification of great suffering is indispensable; yet for all that she would rather it should be imposed upon him by means of anyone else than her. It was her bounden

duty to proclaim what she had discovered in order that the world might be on its guard against the impostor, and that the innocent might be saved from unjust suspicion. Then this man would be put in prison — where he would be safe from further temptations, where he would have time for repentance, where it would be impossible for him to hold any intercourse with Imogen. Yet, obviously desirable and advantageous as all these results of his imprisonment would be, still Ethel felt a growing repugnance to speak the word that was to bring them about.

'I am so sorry for you, so *very*, *very* sorry,' she was beginning, when her speech was cut short by a sudden and alarming interruption which caused all other considerations to be merged in one of paramount and urgent importance to both of them—*i.e.*, the securing of their immediate personal safety.

## CHAPTER IX.

### AMONGST FLAMES.

A SUDDEN cessation of the music, a hasty trampling of feet, and an outcry of 'Fire, fire!'—this was what caused Ethel to stop abruptly in the midst of what she had begun to say, whilst she and her companion looked at each other in horror. Then they started up with one accord and hurried to a small door of the room they were in.

A great square staircase with a gallery surrounding it occupied a large portion of the middle of the house, and the door to which they now hurried opened immedi-

ately on to this gallery, and was, therefore, the most direct way of escape from the house. But on reaching the door they found it impossible to get any further. All egress from the room where they were, in the direction of the gallery at all events, was cut off by a dense mass of frightened, struggling men and women, who blocked up the passage outside in wild confusion.

The first alarm has made every one anxious to get at once to the front staircase, and there is a general, simultaneous rush made towards it throughout every room on the first floor. But speedily there is a check at every doorway, where the outpouring stream is met by another one composed of those who got first to the staircase, and have there discovered the vanity of hoping to escape in that direction. For, alas! the lower part of the grand staircase is the very spot where the fire has broken out, and it is spreading rapidly up the sides by means of the gauze

decorations of the bannisters. Going down the stairs, therefore, is simply rushing into the middle of flames; and it is evident that the gallery running round the top will shortly be also on fire. A most dangerous place, consequently, is that gallery which was just now struggled for so eagerly, and one to be by all means avoided.

What is to be done? Surely there is a back staircase to have recourse to—no house of this size can be without that convenience—who knows where it is?

Yes, there *is* a back stairs, and a good many of the guests know the way to it. Unluckily, it is somewhat out of the way, and the approach to it is narrow and inconvenient; still, it means safety at this moment, and thither does the stream flow with such speed as is attainable by a closely-packed, terrified mob of people, all shoving and struggling to get to the front, and moving along a tortuous corridor where every doorway brings fresh contributions

of panic-struck human beings in deadly peril. For time is everything, and those who are last will inevitably be lost. The back stairs are not broad, and the crowd can only empty itself off thereby at a pitifully slow rate; and meanwhile the ravening flames will not wait; but, aided by all kinds of decorative fall-alls of thin materials, come leaping up the front stairs in fearful haste. Red tongues begin to shoot out through the bannisters into the gallery, which has not yet had nearly time to get cleared of the people, who rushed thither before the seat of the fire was known. Ill is it now for some of those who were first in that rush. The solid mass of humanity pressing towards the other staircase is a barrier keeping them prisoners in the fatal gallery, and it is hard to recoil far enough to keep out of the way of these cruel fiery tongues that leap higher and nearer at every minute. Ah! one of them touches the dress of a girl, and in a moment she is in a

blaze ; for a ball dress is of all things most inflammable. Instinctively turning to her fellow-creatures for protection in her mortal agony, she tries to press yet closer to them, and yet further away from the dreadful enemy, without remembering that in her present flaming condition, contact with her means death to all clad in thin dresses, and that she is now to be regarded as a fresh centre of danger—as a torch to spread the conflagration wherever she goes. But if she has forgotten this, others have not ; and from out of the frantic, shrieking crowd are extended hands, fans, opera-hats, bouquets, anything that can be laid hold of, to keep her at a distance. Still, she will not be repulsed, and continues trying to approach ; so the end of it is that a strong arm in a coat (since cloth does not catch fire easily) advances from out of the midst of the people nearest her, and gives one violent push that precipitates the poor, screaming girl headlong downstairs

into the fiery gulf below. Inhuman and horrible as the act may seem, is it not perhaps the only thing to do? It is one life against many; to save her was impossible, and she had at all hazards to be kept away from this crowd full of women in tulles, gauzes, and muslins. Ah, well! her sufferings are over by now; but for us who remain—what is in store for us? Shall we escape or not?

How terribly fast the red tongues advance, gaining and spreading in all directions each moment! And how miserably slow is the rate of exit by the back stairs! Is there no other outlet? no other chance of getting away from being burnt to death? There are the windows, it is true. But the rooms of this magnificent dwelling are so lofty that the distance to the ground is far too great to jump; and the balconies are boarded in to-night, so that the pillars are not available as a means of descent even for those

who can climb. Confused, shrieking, gasping, mad with terror, the people fight, jostle, and push almost without knowing that they are doing so; and many of the weaker ones, thrown down and trampled under foot, find in suffocation an escape from the fiery death that they are dreading. And all the time the foe goes on gaining and gaining with the swiftness of the wind, has swallowed up some more tulle-attired victims, and is beginning with fierce triumph to enter one or two of the rooms.

But it is time to go back to Sylvester and Ethel, whom we left when the first alarm had reached them, and they had run to one of the doors leading out of the apartment where they were sitting. As soon as Sylvester saw what was taking place, and that the passage was completely choked up, he exclaimed,—

'The private way to the theatre! Few people know of it, so it's sure to be free

from crowd. If the fire hasn't touched it yet we can get out by that!'

'I didn't know there was such a way,' she returned; 'where is it?'

'Follow me,' was his answer, as he hastened to a door on the opposite side of the room. This led to a small, winding side-passage, through which they reached the conservatory; and on getting there, they found that there was no one in it, and that it was still clear from fire.

When the theatre in the garden had been erected, Guelph Crœsus-Hogg had taken it into his head that he should like to have a private way of his own for going to and fro between the house and stage. Therefore, some planks had been thrown across from a corner of the conservatory to the upper part of the theatre, roofed in, boarded at the sides, and carpeted and lined, so as to construct a tiny wooden passage, which, though extremely frail, and not broad enough to contain two people abreast,

was yet quite sufficient to satisfy his whim.

This private way was known only to the household and to a few of the male actors who had been taken backwards and forwards along it occasionally by Guelph at rehearsals; and in this number Sylvester had fortunately been included. The entrance to the passage was concealed by a heavy velvet curtain, which he lifted up for Ethel. Then he said, pointing down the way as he spoke,—

'That'll bring you into the right hand gallery of the theatre. From there you will easily find your way downstairs and get out.'

'Are not you coming too then?' panted Ethel, breathless with the haste of their flight.

'Not till I have seen to your cousin's safety first,' was his answer, as he turned away from her and hurried across the conservatory again.

At the door he was almost knocked down by coming into violent collision with Guelph, who was hurrying along with Lady Elise.

'Jove!' cried the former when he saw who it was; 'where are you going, man? Have you forgotten my little passage? Everything else blocked — only chance left!'

'I'm coming directly,' cried Sylvester, 'but must find some one first. Don't hinder me!'

'I say! it won't hold many! Give us time to get off before you tell other people of it—don't be in too much of a hurry—keep it dark till we're safe,' Guelph hallooed after him; but Sylvester was already out of hearing.

There was a perfect network of side passages, small rooms, and ins and outs in the millionaire's great house, and as Sylvester had learnt a good deal of its geography during his attendance at rehearsals,

that knowledge now enabled him to pass round from room to room without coming in contact with the crowd, through whom it would have been impossible to make a way.

Heartrending screams and cries filled the air. Everyone was striving wildly to gain the only known outlet—the remote back staircase; and every approach to it was crammed. Perhaps Imogen might be amongst the fortunate ones who had already escaped down it and reached a place of safety. If so, well and good; but if not! He was almost maddened at the idea that she might be perishing at that very moment in this terrible place whilst a means of escape was within easy reach. To the woes of the rest of that great company he was callous, and it never entered his head that there could be any necessity for imparting to a soul amongst them except her the secret of the private way. Why, if he did, the knowledge would spread like lightning, and a crowd would rush to the

passage, choke it up, and break it down; and then how would he be able to save Imogen even if he found her? His theory had always been that people must take care of themselves or else go to the wall; and his conduct—both as regarded himself and others—had invariably been regulated in accordance therewith. It was true there flashed across his mind an uneasy recollection that the theory was one which Imogen had protested against indignantly; and that she had been delighted with Sir Charles for acting exactly contrary to it, and putting himself in danger for the sake of a lot of strange school children. But there was no time to consider things like that now. The one thing necessary was to seek for her high and low, and rescue her if she was not already safe.

Glancing hastily from the outskirts of the throng over the dense mass of humanity crushing and striving to get to the back stairs, and not seeing her there, he hurried

off to explore elsewhere. The doom of all who were in the dreadful gallery was sealed irrevocably, as it was by this time all on fire, and he shuddered with horror to think of the possibility of her having been amongst them.

The first room into which he looked contained nobody. In the second were only two women. One was a very old lady, whose age and infirmities had made it wholly impossible for her to try and save herself in the rough, surging crowd; and the other was her middle-aged daughter, who—though world-hardened, painted, and frivolous—would not desert her old mother in this extremity, even to attempt to secure her own safety. The cheeks of both were rouged, and the fixed bright colour contrasted strangely with the ghastly white of their quivering lips, and with the scared expression of their faces as they clung together in despair; the daughter, helpless as she really was, yet striving to impart

some sense of comfort and protection to her feeble mother by kissing and stroking her with infinite tenderness.

It was a pathetic little scene that might well have touched him with sufficient compassion to make him show them the way by which they could have escaped. But no such thought occurred to him, and he only uttered an exclamation of disappointment, and hurried on quickly to explore a third room for Imogen.

There, to his inexpressible relief, he perceived the object of his search. She was standing with her father near a window, and he and she together were endeavouring with frantic haste to construct a sort of rough rope out of the cords of the window-blinds, loopings of curtains, and whatever else they could lay hands on that could possibly serve their purpose. But the materials were not very suitable; their fingers were unskilled at the labour; and the rope was still deplorably far from com-

pletion. There was only one other person in the room besides these two, and that was Sir Charles Dover, who was lying back in a big arm-chair and evidently insensible, if not dead. If dead, then *he* would not be able to have the happiness of winning Imogen, at anyrate, was the thought that crossed Sylvester's mind, not unpleasantly, as he advanced across the room.

But the baronet was only stunned—not dead. He had been dancing with Imogen when the alarm was first given, and as they had happened to be near Mr Rhys at that moment, the three had subsequently kept together. In the commotion it happened that a large and heavy marble bust close to where they were, became loosened and began toppling over. Sir Charles saw the great weight just as it was in the act of descending on the heads of the solid crowd below, and sprang towards it,

making a desperate effort to seize hold of it, and keep it in its place. He failed, however, and the bust crashed over upon the living mass, one corner hitting him on the temple as it fell. Had he been at the time in the thick of the crowd, he would have inevitably been trampled under foot; but as he was fortunately at the extreme edge of it, he had been able to stagger into the next room before falling down insensible.

By the time this happened, Mr Rhys had discovered how extremely small was the chance of getting to the back staircase soon enough to escape by it; and it suddenly struck him that it might be possible for him and his daughter to make a rope strong enough to bear the weight of a man, by means of which they might let themselves down from a window—and Sir Charles also, if he had not recovered by the time the rope was ready. The only doubt was whether

there would be sufficient time to execute this scheme. However, as far as he could see, it was either that or nothing for them all; so he drew Imogen with him into the room where Sir Charles had fainted away, and set her to work with him at rope-making as fast as possible.

But the time was becoming fearfully short, and the advance of the flames was hand-over-hand faster than was that of the rope.

This then was the position of affairs when Sylvester at last found the girl of whom he was in search. As she saw him approach, she pointed to their work, and made signs to him to come and assist them at it. Speaking would have been useless, for she could not have made her voice reach to as far off as where he was, on account of the terrible din that prevailed.

The extremely elementary appearance presented by the rope convinced Sylvester that it could not possibly be finished in time to be of service.

'The rope'll do you no good!' he shouted, going close to her and her father, and making himself heard with difficulty. 'Come with me—I can save you.'

There was no time for explanations, so they desisted instantly from the rope-making, and Mr Rhys turned to lift up Sir Charles, while Imogen shouted into Sylvester's ear,—

'Will you and papa be able to carry him alone? or shall I give a hand too?'

There had certainly never occurred to Sylvester the possibility of this. To be expected to linger when every moment was of inestimable value, in order to help save his rival—the man whom it would be more congenial to his feelings to send out of the world than to keep in it! It seemed to him more than human nature—or *his* nature anyhow—could bring itself to do; and his first impulse was to refuse absolutely to lay a finger on the unconscious young man.

'Never mind him!' cried Sylvester; 'you must leave him, and save yourselves while you can!'

But neither Mr Rhys nor Imogen were of those who will consent to desert a friend in extremity, and to leave Sir Charles to his fate was not to be thought of for an instant by either of them. So she merely shook her head in response to Sylvester's impatient adjuration, and prepared to assist her father in raising the baronet. As she stooped over him, she cast a reproachful and appealing glance at Sylvester.

The mute request for his aid was more than he could resist, coming from her. Besides, his knowledge of her character told him that if he continued to refuse his assistance, it would only end in Mr Rhys and her carrying Sir Charles by themselves as best they could.

That would cause delay now, when time was so inexpressibly precious; for of course

her strength was far less than that of a young and vigorous man like himself, and she and her father would bear the burden much more slowly than if he were in her place. Overcoming, therefore, with a great effort, his intense distaste for what he was about to do, he seized hold of Sir Charles by the shoulders, leaving the feet to Mr Rhys, and with Imogen at their heels they sped along towards the conservatory by a side way that he knew of; it was not the most direct route to take, but it was one that enabled them to skirt round the fearful confusion going on in the principal passages, without coming in contact with or being hindered by it. His two companions accepted his guidance blindly, not knowing whither he was taking them nor how he intended to escape, till they found themselves in the conservatory. Here he hurried across to the covered entrance to the private way, drew back the curtain that concealed it, and made Imogen go on into

it in front of them—for its construction was so frail that he did not feel quite certain whether it would not break down under the weight of two men carrying a third; and if she went first, her safety would be ensured whatever might happen.

Meanwhile the hubbub and turmoil all around seemed to grow continually greater, and the confusion worse confounded. By this time one fire-engine had arrived at the house; and what with the shrieks and groans of the miserable people cooped up inside, the shouts of the crowd outside, and the hissing of the water poured upon the flames, the Babel of sounds was in truth appalling.

Just after Imogen had got inside the tiny passage that led to safety, a sudden thought struck her and she stood still. Hitherto she had followed Sylvester without reasoning upon what they were doing, but now she all at once perceived of what value this means of exit might be to num-

bers of other people, if only they were aware of its existence.

'More lives could be saved if this way were known about!' she cried. 'People think there's nothing but the staircase. I'll go back and tell them of this.'

The mere idea made Sylvester's heart well-nigh stand still with horror. How greatly did he then rejoice at having made her enter the narrow passage first, for now it was impossible for her to make her way back past him and Mr Rhys, however much she might desire to do so!

'You shall *not!*' he exclaimed. 'You shall *not* pass back. Don't you see how mad it would be for you to do the thing you propose? A woman—in a dress that a spark might set on fire at any moment! Hurry on—and don't linger here!'

She had no choice but to obey, for the path behind her was entirely filled up by the two men and their burden. Yet it was unwillingly that she continued her pro-

gress, and in spite of what Sylvester had said, she would most certainly have flown back to do what she could for her fellow-creatures if she had been free to do what she chose.

At that moment there arose a sudden fresh clamour of screams, groans, and cries that was more appalling than ever, and pierced her ears and heart anew.

'Oh, this is horrible! horrible!' she exclaimed; 'can *nothing* be done for them? Let me go back, and tell at least some few of this outlet! Do let me go!' Her distress affected Sylvester powerfully. It seemed impossible that he should witness it without attempting to relieve it.

And then, suddenly, there came upon him like an inspiration, the idea that such an opportunity as he could never again have lay before him. Yes, for once in his life, at all events, he had now a chance of doing something that would meet with her thorough approval, and he must not

let the unlooked-for chance slip. He would himself do this thing that she was so anxious should be done; he would himself return to the fiery house, and see if he could not rescue some more people by means of the little passage whilst it was still available. He would first help Mr Rhys to deposit Sir Charles, who was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness, in the theatre, which was a place of comparative safety. Thence Mr Rhys and Imogen could easily complete the escape of all three without his further assistance, and he would go back to fulfil her pleasure. After all, the expedition would not be quite so dangerous for him, as at first sight it might appear. Though as soon as the flames should reach the conservatory, the planks of the private way would, of course, quickly be alight, and the retreat cut off, yet that had not yet happened. No fire had yet extended so far, and there might be minutes and

minutes still before the conservatory would be touched. Therefore the way was at this moment safe and open. A man's costume was not of the inflammable materials of a lady's ball-dress. To a person like him, naturally brave, knowing the ins and outs of the house well, and having all his wits about him, the undertaking offered a very reasonable prospect of success, and of a safe return from it.

Besides, he was just then in a state of unnatural excitement, which made him unusually reckless of danger. He knew himself to be detected, and on the verge of being ruined, and hopelessly cut off from the woman he loved passionately. Soon she would know all, and turn from him with loathing and disgust. But she did not know yet; and now—this night—for once, at least, she should think well of him, come what might. There should be at least one memory of him to approve of whenever she might happen to think of

him in the future; outcast and criminal though he might be.

This thing, too, whereon her heart was set so strangely—this desire to help others—must it not really possess some actual good of its own which he had never been able to discover? Else why would one like her care so much about it?

And in a sort of way there thus came to him through her he loved, some approach to sympathetic compassion for the miserable creatures perishing in the fire, to whose sufferings he would otherwise have been indifferent.

There was no time for many words, even had it been easy for a voice to make itself audible in that wild uproar. The instant he was beyond the passage, Sylvester laid down Sir Charles, and hurriedly pointed out to Mr Rhys the way by which he would have now to proceed in order to get into the open air again through the theatre.

Meanwhile he still occupied the entrance to the passage, so that there might be no possibility of Imogen's rushing back, and carrying out her intention in spite of him.

Then he turned to her.

'Not you, but me!' he shouted. 'I'm going back to do what you wish. Will that please you?'

It was more than she had expected of him. A sudden expression of gladness, surprise, and admiration rushed into her face, and showed clearly what she was feeling.

'Oh yes!' she exclaimed; and then added simply, 'I'll pray for you meanwhile.'

Never before had her eyes rested upon him with the look of trust and cordial approval that shone in them at that moment. He was almost intoxicated with the delight that it caused him. His heart throbbed with wild joy as at some great honour conferred on him, and he desired

ardently to deserve it, while yet at the same time he had a consciousness of being very different from what she imagined him to be, which abashed him in spite of himself.

Acting on the impulse of the moment he seized her hand and kissed it. 'Thank you,' was all that he said. But the words could not have been uttered with more sincerity and profound, real, gratitude by the most earnestly religious of human beings. And then, feeling strangely exalted, glad, and aided by the knowledge of her prayers on his behalf, he flew back to the Pandemonium he had just quitted.

There matters were growing rapidly worse. The fresh outbreak of shrieks that had wrung Imogen's heart had been caused by the flames spreading to the foot of the back staircase—all crammed and packed as it was with fugitives. In honour of the grand entertainment of the night it had been swathed from top to

bottom in gauze, gracefully festooned and draped; and the fire, catching the gauze like so much tinder, ran up the sides like lightning and enveloped all who were on the steps in one blaze. For these poor creatures no escape was possible. But those who had not yet reached the staircase might still have some faint hope of saving themselves, so there was a sudden check in the stream of people who were pressing eagerly towards it as their last chance of salvation. Stopping short and turning sharp round, they struggled frantically to fly in the opposite direction; and as those in the rear were still ignorant of what had happened, the confined limits of the passage became the scene of a short but furious conflict before the receding throng could prevail over the advancing one and turn the current backwards again.

Wilder and wilder grew the tumult as soon as it was realised that the only known

means of exit was in the power of the foe. The panic-stricken mob took refuge in the rooms and fought for access to the windows. Some shouted to those below to bring blankets for them to jump into —imploring them to save them somehow —anyhow—for the love of God. A few leaped out recklessly without heeding what might be beneath to alight on—whether road, garden, pavement, or pointed rails; possessed by an agonised terror of death by fire they thought only of avoiding that, and cared nought for the risk of being bruised, maimed, impaled, or killed in their fall. And now a fire-escape arrives at the window of the second drawing-room. But everyone cannot get to that at once—and there is the floor of one room fallen in with a fearful crash already! The fire gains so fast, so terribly fast!

This then was the state of things prevailing when Sylvester returned. Close

to the conservatory door he met a group of people half-dazed with fright and roaming about distractedly without any definite object in their movements. By dint of gestures, words, and some violence he got them to the entrance to the private way, and made them understand that they must go along it. The sight of this unexpected means of deliverance out of the fiery prison seemed to restore their scattered wits, and they fled down the passage without further hesitation, whilst he went back in search of others.

As he entered the room adjoining the conservatory there came a great puff of spark-filled smoke that startled him and showed the enemy to be closer at hand than he had imagined. For an instant he paused in doubt.

Would the way back be passable a little longer? Had he not better return now while escape was certain? But the kindly look that he had seen on Imogen's face

a few minutes ago was before his eyes, and he was yet glowing with the enthusiasm and happiness it had given him. Would he merit her favour if he should leave so many victims to perish miserably, while there was still a fair chance of rescuing some of them ?

Hardly, he thought; and, so thinking, rushed back for one last effort to save life. The fire had as yet only just appeared in the room in which he was, and before it could spread to the conservatory there would surely be time to dash once more into the body of the house and get back again with yet a few more men and women snatched from the jaws of destruction. Without losing an instant he rushed into a room where a number of people had taken refuge.

'Safety! a way out! follow me!' he roared at the top of his voice, gesticulating and beckoning at the same time to attract the attention of those who could not hear

his words. There was a tumultuous rush to accompany him on the part of those who partly heard what he said and partly guessed at his meaning, and he led the way back in furious haste through the blinding smoke that rolled more and more densely through every part of the house. There was still time—surely there was still time!

Alas! some of those fatal decorations of muslin and gauze had been put up in the conservatory also. These having caught fire led the flames with fearful speed all round the glass building; by the time Sylvester returned there with his companions the place was all ablaze. The wooden passage had caught fire and he was shut in hopelessly to perish with those for whose deliverance he had sacrificed his last chance of safety.

Ceilings and floors having once begun to go are falling in rapidly. The sparks fall thicker and thicker—the smoke grows

more and more unendurable—the only fire-escape that has yet arrived is far away—and the end cannot be very long in coming.

Well, at all events he has done his best to please her, and to act for once according to the principles in which she believes—even though it *was* unfortunately wholly beyond his power to attain to that state of general virtuousness that she would persist in admiring. He has done all he can for her, and he thinks that he wishes she could know that, at any rate. But though that is impossible, yet somehow, and in some strange way, he does not feel so absolutely severed from her now, as he has always done heretofore. He remembers that last look she bestowed upon him as they parted. Besides, does he not know what she is doing at this very moment? she is praying for him—she promised that she would, and she always keeps her promises. Who had told him something about the prayer of a righteous man avail-

ing much? He seems to have heard it or read it somewhere or other, but he can't remember where. Anyhow it makes him very glad to be certain that she is praying for him.

Ah! what a fierce, scorching gust came then, and how difficult it is to breathe in this suffocating smoke! And suddenly there flashes across his recollection the cool, dewy freshness of the air that early morning last September when first her voice and merry laugh rang in his ears. Cool—dew—freshness! can one understand that such things can exist when one is in a burning, horrible atmosphere like this?

Still she is praying for him—and he has done what he could to save the people as she wished. Oh, this terrible feeling of choking! air! air!—is there none? but she is praying for him all the time—he knows that with certainty, and it comforts him strangely somehow, though he knows not why.

Not until the whole house was burnt down was the conflagration extinguished, and amongst the numbers who perished in the flames was Sylvester—noble and heroic in his death, however evil and criminal in his life. Neither the misfortunes of his early training, his faults, nor his follies had ever managed wholly to quench the latent power for good that was within him, and that had been quickened to life by the unconscious influence of one whom he loved. Little had that love ever brought him from first to last save exceptional pain and unhappiness; yet who shall say that he was not really the gainer for a suffering that was able to purify his nature from so much of the evil in which it had become encased?

## CHAPTER X.

### AN UNGRACIOUS TASK.

TERRIBLY long was the list of people who perished in the great fire at the Crœsus-Hoggs, and rarely had London been so deeply shocked and moved by any event.

Amongst the victims, however, Mr Rhys and Imogen and Sir Charles were fortunately not included. After Sylvester left them, the girl and her father had managed to carry and drag Sir Charles out of the theatre. Once outside, the open air had helped to revive him, and he had been able to stagger along with their

assistance till they were beyond reach of danger; then he had been taken as soon as possible to his rooms and put under the care of a doctor, who ordered him to bed immediately, and enjoined a condition of strict quiet for some days at least.

Ethel also had escaped unharmed. When she saw in the next day's paper that Sylvester was amongst the victims, she felt at the first moment as if a great weight was taken off her mind. Villain though he was, he had saved her life, nevertheless, and she was glad to think that there was now no necessity for her to make known his crime, since he was dead, and there was no longer a danger of his harming anyone. Poor Imogen! how sad for her if she had indeed cared for him—yet less sad now, perhaps, than it would have been if he were still alive. And Ethel's anxiety on this point was so great that she at once put on her bonnet and walked across to Lowndes Square—ostensibly to see

how her cousin was after the fearful events of the night before, and really to try and ascertain if the girl were mourning over a lost lover. If so, Ethel thought she might be able to comfort her with the account of that ardent love for her which he had expressed—the knowledge that he had been devoted to her to the last, would surely be some consolation to the poor girl.

So completely had Ethel, by this time, worked herself into the belief that her cousin had fallen in love with Sylvester, that it was an immense relief to her to perceive, by the way in which Imogen spoke, that she was evidently heart-whole about him. In Ethel's satisfaction at this discovery she said nothing about what had passed between her and him at the last interview they had had together—for why, thought she, should she trouble her cousin with the thought of having been loved by this man? Anyhow she would not do it in a hurry, but would take time to consider

whether it would be wise to impart that piece of information or not.

From Imogen she learnt what had not had time to get into the newspapers, and what she did not therefore yet know; and that was, how heroically he had gone back to save others, and thus met with his death.

As the heiress returned to Belgrave Square, she could not help pondering over the short glimpses she had had of this man whom she had seen but twice in her life, and thinking what a strange character his must have been. Her disposition, feelings, and principles were all thoroughly antagonistic to such a criminal, and prompted her to think of him only with abhorrence—yet somehow she did not feel inclined in the present case altogether to obey this prompting. When first she had discovered that he was the person who had robbed her, she had regarded him with the utmost possible horror and

aversion, supposing him to be nothing less than an utter scoundrel. But the revelation of his real self that he had subsequently made to her, had touched and moved her, notwithstanding her prejudice against him, and that favourable impression was now increased by the knowledge of the self-sacrificing manner of his death. As she thought about him she recognised the fact that she had been brought face to face with a nature of by no means an every-day kind, and that he who had been able thus to wring some sort of esteem from her, almost in spite of herself, must have had some force of character distinguishing him from the common herd of men. To have to proclaim him a robber would have been most distasteful to her, she thought; she had at first only hesitated about it, lest Imogen should have been so unfortunate as to set her affections on him, but now other reasons also made her unwilling to make known his iniquity, and

Ethel was rejoicing to think that she would not have to do so, when suddenly the recollection of Richard Richards came to her and filled her with dismay. The poor man was about to leave his home, driven away by the popular belief that he was guilty of her burglary, and nothing save the production of the real offender could remove that suspicion from him. To consider the living before the dead, and the innocent before the guilty was a manifest duty. Was she then to come forward, now that Sylvester was dead, and to strip off the veil of ignorance under cover of which his memory was held in respect, admiration, and honour? Surely he who had saved her life, merited better treatment than that at her hands; it seemed as if there would be something especially ungenerous, mean, and ungrateful in a denunciation of him coming from *her*. Yet, alas! what else was there for her to do? However ungracious the task might be,

there was no other possible way of exonerating Richards from a false charge, and restoring his character. So she overcame her great reluctance to speak, and revealed the secret of Sylvester's burglary.

Of course such a startling piece of news produced an immense sensation. Society was quite in consternation to find that a man of this kind had been living in the midst of it, and going about like anyone else without anybody's having ever dreamt of supposing there was any harm in him. Why, good Heavens! who could one venture to feel sure of after such a discovery as this? How were Brown, Jones, and Robinson ever again to dare to put faith in one another? Would they not henceforth be perpetually looking askance at each other, and mutually suspecting themselves of being forgers, pickpockets, incendiaries, and perhaps murderers, in disguise? Then, too, in the chorus of indignant exclamations were to be heard the voices of a few of

those people of the prophet-after-the-event class who are never wanting when any surprising event takes place. These declared that they had had more insight than the rest of the world, and had always been convinced that there was something queer about Sylvester, and that he was not a man to be trusted further than you could see him. It was an opinion which they had, as they averred, stated repeatedly to other people; and this statement it was of course impossible for anyone to contradict, though it certainly did seem rather odd that it should receive no corroboration whatever from the memories of even those friends who were most intimate with them, and therefore most likely to be acquainted with what they had said. But then some people are so unaccountably forgetful!

On the whole, however, his memory was not harshly dealt with, and the comments made upon it were far more kindly and charitable than they would have been if he

had died a natural death. The manner in which he had lost his life restrained and silenced idle and venomous tongues in spite of themselves. For death for the sake of others compels all men to admiration whether they will or no—it seems as though some shadow of the Divinity of the crucifixion must rest upon it for ever.

Little as Ethel had seen of Sylvester, and little as their two natures had in common, she had yet understood him sufficiently to be sure that there was nothing he would have more ardently desired than that Imogen should do him justice and think kindly of him now that he was dead. Therefore Ethel no longer now hesitated to relate faithfully to her cousin what had taken place between them at that last interview before the fire. She resolved to let the girl know the good that had been in him, the passionate love that he had borne her, and the suffering which it had entailed upon him. In doing this Ethel

felt that she would make the only reparation in her power for the obloquy that she had been the unwilling means of bringing upon his memory, and it seemed to her almost like a dying man's message that had been entrusted to her to deliver.

It happened that several days elapsed before circumstances were propitious for her to make the communication that weighed upon her conscience; but at last a favourable moment occurred one day when she found herself alone with Imogen in the Rhys' house in Lowndes Square, and she profited by the opportunity immediately. Truth to tell, she had a sort of lingering, unexpressed fear, lest perhaps Imogen might have drawn the man on by flirting with him unfairly, but she was made easy on that score by the genuinely innocent surprise and concern which the girl's face showed when she heard of his attachment to her.

'Oh, how sorry I am!' she exclaimed

'I never dreamt of all this! I only knew that he seemed rather to like to dance with and talk to me, and never suspected that anything deeper lay behind. Lots of couples do that much together without the least meaning anything more serious, and I supposed it was just the same between him and me. I do wish he hadn't cared for me so! It makes me quite uncomfortable to think of it.'

'I don't wonder at that;' answered Ethel. 'You find that you had enormous power over him of which you knew nothing, and of course you naturally feel anxious as to how you may have used that power. The influence exercised by people who are loved over those who love them is so important a factor in the world's concerns, that I sometimes think it's almost enough to make us all shrink from being loved because of the responsibility which that love lays upon our shoulders.'

It was quaint to hear Ethel delivering

herself thus without in the least suspecting the extent of her own power in this way over Imogen, and the great weight attached by the latter to all her utterances and opinions.

'Yes, indeed it is,' returned Imogen, heartily; 'I'm sure I'd far rather that he hadn't cared for me at all. The wonder to me is, whatever can have made him do it? I know *I* shouldn't have!'

The wonder thus naïvely expressed was perfectly sincere and free from all intention of being a bait for a compliment, as Ethel easily perceived.

'I daresay that some one will explain that to you some day or other,' she returned, smiling; 'wait till you get married, and then see!'

'Married!' cried Imogen. 'I don't ever mean to get married. I've said so over and over again, and stuck to it, too, in spite of all the stuff Ralph talks. His favourite saying is, "Every woman intends

to marry if she can ; and quite right too, for if she doesn't, she's a mistake." But I shall just show him the contrary. What does a boy like that know about us ? '

' Ah, well,' replied her cousin, ' perhaps you will, and perhaps you won't — you know possibly you may change your mind some day. If ever you do, at all events you'll have one satisfaction that will be denied to me in similar circumstances, and that I confess I envy you.'

' What's that ? '

' The satisfaction of not being forced to think that you are probably sought for your money, and not for yourself. You know that is a fear that I must have continually before my eyes. I shall never be able to feel sure that anyone likes me really.'

' Oh, I don't think you need be unhappy about that ! ' rejoined Imogen. ' I'm sure lots of people like you ever so much ! Look how welcome you are everywhere ;

I've sometimes thought that I wish I were half as popular as you are—it must be very pleasant.'

'Well—yes—so I find it generally, I believe,' answered Ethel, reflectively. 'Only then the pleasantness is rather spoilt now and then, when it suddenly occurs to me that probably it is only the owner of so much wealth that is wanted and welcomed, and that whether that owner's name be Carton or Crœsus-Hogg is a matter of profound indifference to the person welcoming. I very rarely think of such a thing, for of course there's no use in making oneself miserable about what is inevitable. Still, when the idea *does* happen to cross my mind, I naturally don't find it a very agreeable and soothing one. Sometimes I fancy that it must be in vain for me ever to hope to be liked quite disinterestedly—that the esteem in which I might be held by even the honestest and most unselfish people, would always be to

some degree affected by the fact of my money.'

It was at the tip of Imogen's tongue to reply,—'*I* like you for yourself, at all events.' But she checked herself before the words had passed her lips. They would sound like a mere empty protestation ; and for mere empty protestations she entertained a profound contempt. Better to wait, and let time show whether or no her friendship was a real and enduring one. Therefore all she answered was,—

'Yes; I suppose it must be a horrid bore never to be able to trust to anyone's caring for you in earnest. But, after all, I don't think you find the position of an heiress altogether intolerable — do you, Ethel? You can't say honestly that you want to change it—now can you?'

Ethel laughed.

'I never said I did,' she returned. 'But I must be off now, or I shall be too late for an engagement. By-the-bye, have you

heard lately how Sir Charles Dover is getting on? They say he was a good deal hurt.'

'He's getting better, I believe,' answered Imogen; 'I shall hear for certain how he is before long, for Ralph is up in town again for a couple of nights, and said he should go and see how Sir Charles was to-day.'

And so Ethel departed to keep her appointment, and Imogen was left to her own meditations.

## CHAPTER XI.

### A SENSITIVE CONSCIENCE.

IMOGEN'S meditations after her cousin's departure were not of a particularly agreeable nature. She was somewhat more upset by all that had just happened than she would condescend to show. First there had been the shock of the horrible fire, of her own narrow escape, and of Sylvester's gallant death. Then came the startling discovery that the man with whom she had associated, and who had saved her life in the conflagration, had been a thief and evil-doer, so base and unprincipled as to have

had no scruples about letting someone else suffer in his stead, and encouraging the idea that another man had committed the crime of which he was himself guilty. And now finally came this fresh revelation of his having loved her.

To find that he had cared for her in earnest was a complete surprise to her. She was a girl who was remarkably free from the common female attribute of vanity, and was not at all likely to imagine any admiration of herself as existing, unless it were expressed very plainly indeed. He had never told her right out that he cared for her, nor had he in any other way made his sentiments evident enough for her to perceive them.

Since the time of her coming out, her life had been amply filled by the business entailed upon her by this new phase of existence—the business of assimilating some things to herself and herself to others, by which process her character was being un-

consciously transmuted and formed whilst still retaining its own original individuality as the foundation. In all that appertained to this, she had been too fully occupied to have time to trouble her head with speculations as to whether any particular person liked her or not, or to what extent the liking might go. She had always supposed that Mr Sylvester must think her tolerably agreeable because he seemed to like to be with her; but she attached no further importance than that to his fondness for her society. She had generally found him pleasant, and had learnt to recognise that he possessed a strange power of attraction that was peculiar to himself. But to regard him as a lover was a very different matter, and she had never felt inclined to do that. Had she been saved from such a misfortune by the firmness of her conviction that she should never want to marry anyone at all? Or had she perhaps had some kind of

intuition warning her of that invisible gulf between them of which he had been so painfully conscious ?

Ethel had spoken of the responsibility of being loved ; and the words now came home to Imogen not only with the force due to the undoubted truth they conveyed, but also with the additional weight which they derived in her eyes on account of the person who had uttered them. Imogen was disquieted as well as surprised to think of the power that she had had over Sylvester. She could not help asking herself uneasily how far she might have been responsible for his moral condition since she had known him ? and whether, perhaps, some of his subsequent lack of goodness or actual wickedness might not lie at her door ? When in her best and highest moods she had often been troubled by an impatience of the uselessness of her life, and had felt eager cravings to be able to benefit the world somehow—to do some-

thing that should make a real difference in it for good. And now that it appeared that the very chance she had longed for had come to her without her perceiving it, she felt by no means satisfied of having made the most of it, and profited by it, as she might have done.

To think that she should have had the opportunity of influencing another human being, a soul, a clever, strong man who might in turn have influenced perhaps numbers of other people also—what a tremendous responsibility that was! Had she always spoken and acted as she would have done if she had known of this responsibility? as she wished she had done now? Had she not, perhaps, sometimes done harm by careless, foolish words which, though not exactly wrong in themselves, had yet fallen short of what they ought to have been, and had certainly not been such as she would have uttered if she had had an idea that there was anyone likely

to attach especial importance to them? Or even if she had not done any actual harm by her conversation, yet had she done all the good that it had been in her power to do? Possibly if she had been altogether a better person than she was—more consistent, more earnest, more true to the highest standard, then she might have been able to assist him effectually, and might perhaps have been the means of reforming him altogether. The immense responsibility of influence had never before been so deeply impressed upon her mind as it was now. For all she could tell the making or marring of a man's life might have been entrusted to her hands, and her conscience would not let her feel altogether satisfied as to the manner in which the trust had been discharged.

A sensitive conscience pricks its owner for sins of omission as well as commission, and she had presently worked herself into a state of considerable self-reproach and

unhappiness. She imagined that she would like to talk the whole affair over with some one else and find out how the eyes of another person would regard it. That thought led naturally to the consideration of who would be a satisfactory individual to confide in, in a case of this kind, and she began to pass her friends in mental review. First she considered her father. No—he would not do. She felt she needed some one with a capacity for youthful enthusiasms, and as he must certainly have outlived his by this time, therefore she was sure it would be no use to expect him to understand her. Her next idea was Ralph. It was not unlikely that he might be able to look at the thing from pretty nearly her own point of view *if* he chose to do so; but then it was quite likely that he would not so choose unless he should happen by luck to be in the right humour just when he was talked to about it. That would never do; for she was sure that she could

never confide what was troubling her to anyone unless she should feel perfectly certain of meeting with a sympathetic reception—so Ralph, also, was dismissed from the list of possible confidants. Then there was Ethel; would not she do? Well—yes—perhaps; yet she, too, did not seem to be exactly the ideal confidante that her cousin was hungering after at that moment; possibly the extreme admiration which Imogen felt for her imparted a sense of awe and restraint that prevented her from appearing absolutely satisfactory in the confidante capacity.

Then Imogen began to wonder when Ralph was coming back from his expedition to see how Sir Charles was getting on. That suggested the thought of the baronet as a possible recipient of the history of what was disturbing her; and, to her surprise, it somehow or other seemed as if he would be the very person she wanted. She believed he would be

sure to comprehend her meaning even if she had a difficulty about putting it very exactly into words—he always did seem to have a faculty for comprehending people who were wanting to do right, she had noticed. Then she was convinced that his opinion would be worth having, because he had always seemed to her to know by instinct what was the best thing to do, without any fuss, bother, or uncertainty, on all occasions. And he was not a person who was ever likely to judge anyone harshly or sternly, which was a yet further recommendation to her when she felt as sore and shaken as she did at present. Quite a childish disinclination to be scolded and longing to be comforted had taken possession of her, and she felt an instinctive conviction that he would be the very ideal comforter whom she desired. Strong, gentle, reliable, and sympathetic, what more could she want? and she was sure that he would neither be

amused at her as her father might be, nor yet snub her as there would be a chance of Ralph's doing.

Then suddenly a new and startling idea that came into her head made her blush hotly. Was there not something odd and unnatural in her feeling such a thorough confidence in a stranger as to cause her to be inclined to turn to him as a comforter rather than to any of her own family? Was this curious preference to be attributed purely to friendly esteem, or could it be the result of a warmer feeling having crept in unawares? Could she, who had always regarded herself as destined to be a champion of single-blessedness as the natural condition of women—could *she* have actually gone and fallen in love? It was surely not possible that she should so readily have departed from her principles! and yet—and yet—and yet—the more she thought about it the more firmly convinced she became

that there really was no one in the whole world to compare to him!

Was she indeed, then, forced to confess to herself that she was in love—and she not yet eighteen! Oh, what a speedy and ignominious come-down from her loftily independent ideas, and oh how Ralph would laugh if he knew it! He didn't know it though—not yet, at all events; perhaps it might be that he never would, for it must all depend upon whether or no Sir Charles were to make her a second offer. She couldn't ask him, if he didn't ask her—that was quite certain.

Was it likely that he would try again? Well—when she came to think of it, she had a kind of idea that such a thing was not wholly impossible. If he did—why then her answer would be somewhat different from what it had been before; only of course he would have to find that out for himself. How provoking Ralph would be when he found himself triumphant, and

how he would crow over her! Indeed, so strongly did that consideration weigh with her, that she began to ask herself whether she could make up her mind to face his ridicule, and whether she would not almost rather remain single to the end of her days. Yes—*almost*, perhaps; but then *almost* is by no means the same thing as *quite*. After all, it would not so much matter being laughed at and crowed over, if she could hope always to be consoled by the only person who appeared to her thoroughly qualified for the office of comforter!

And if he did that for her, would not she perhaps be sometimes able to help him in return? Anyhow he must have thought so when he asked her to marry him, because he had described himself as work for her to do, all ready to her hand. He had declared that a woman could make more difference to the man who loved her than to anyone else in the

world, and all this that had happened about Mr Sylvester certainly seemed to confirm that theory.

Only then again there was such an enormous difference between the two men in question, that perhaps they could hardly be judged by the same rule. Mr Sylvester had needed help in a way that Sir Charles certainly did not. She was sure that the latter was ever so much better than she was, and that it was only his modesty that had made him fancy she could be an assistance to him. Rather it was just the contrary; it was he that could help her, she believed, and not she him. Yet no doubt he had *said* that he wanted her help—and she did not think he told lies.

How silly she had been not to have appreciated his merits properly from the first! Perhaps, after all, he might never give her this second chance which she had been anticipating; perhaps he would take a fancy to marry some one else—some one

who would be too wise to reject such an opportunity of a paragon husband. Well! if so Imogen felt that she would have to bear the disappointment as best she could, knowing that she had only herself to thank for it. At any rate, Ralph would lose his chance of a triumph in that case; for as it was most improbable that such another paragon as Sir Charles could be in existence, therefore there could be no likelihood of her being again tempted to give up her original determination of remaining an old maid to the end of her days.

Here the door opened suddenly, and two people came in whose entrance put an abrupt end to her meditations.

## CHAPTER XII.

### HOW RALPH WILL CROW OVER ME!

PEOPLE sometimes give indications, which may be interpreted by a close observer, of feelings which they are not themselves conscious of possessing, and this had been the case with Imogen. Though she was quite unaware of drifting into falling in love with Sir Charles, there had nevertheless been a slight, indefinable alteration in her manner to him of late, which had not escaped his observation and had raised his hopes greatly. He had thought the alteration especially noticeable when he met her at

the theatricals, and had esteemed it of such good omen to find that the moths he had sent her had not been thrown away, that he contemplated renewing his proposal to her on that very night if he should have a favourable opportunity for doing so. The tragical termination of the party had of course made it impossible for him to execute his purpose, and since then illness had kept him prisoner and prevented his seeing her.

Tossing feverishly on his bed, he had gone over again and again in his mind all that had passed between them, recalling and dwelling upon words, looks, and tones, and trying to draw good auguries therefrom. Was she really changed towards him? or was he merely a ridiculous, presumptuous ass for venturing to think so? Then again he would be depressed at the thought of how very little reason he could discover in himself to make it likely for anyone to fall in love with him; for he was

by no means conceited, and had but a low opinion of his own powers of fascination. But still his hopes reverted hopefully to the difference he had noticed in her recently, and he longed to be able to see her again and to put his luck once more to the test. Being laid by the heels was at that moment most especially annoying, and he daily besieged the doctor with entreaties to be allowed to go about as usual.

When at last the happy day of emancipation from the house arrived, his first thought was to go and call upon the Rhys'. Perhaps she would be at home and alone, and if so, he would surely ask his question. And anyhow he could not rest without making an attempt to see her, whether alone or not, for it was a whole ten days since they had met, and his eyes hungered for a sight of her again, and his ears longed after the sound of her voice. He was on the point of setting out, then, for this call, when Ralph came to see him.

'Hullo!' exclaimed that young gentleman, meeting him on the threshold of the door; 'glad to find you well enough to go out! Don't turn back on my account—I'll come and see you another time! Where are you off to?'

'I was just going to call on your people,' rejoined Sir Charles; 'shall I find them at home, do you suppose?'

'Don't quite know,' answered Ralph. 'I fancy my father's out, but Im may be at home perhaps. Tell you what! I'll go back there with you, and then we can go on together somewhere else afterwards—unless you don't want me, that's to say?'

Sir Charles declared that he would be delighted to have Ralph's company, and then they started for Lowndes Square. On the way there it did occur to the baronet that it might tend to facilitate his seeing Imogen alone if he were to confide the object of his visit to his companion. But then he was deterred by recollecting how

grievously on the previous occasion he had been oppressed and hindered in getting to his proposal by the consciousness of some one else's knowing all about it all the time. So he held his tongue now, and gave Ralph no inkling that there was anything particular in the wind.

Ralph's presence made the servant, who admitted them at Lowndes Square, think it needless to announce the baronet's arrival to Imogen, who was sitting in the drawing-room; thus the two people who suddenly disturbed her in the train of meditations which had led her to discover that she cared about Sir Charles Dover, were none other than that gentleman himself and her brother. This unexpected entrance of the very person she had been thinking about discomposed her considerably; and her cheeks burnt almost as though she had imagined him able to see into her mind, and know the place that he was occupying there.

'Oh! here you are, Im,' observed Ralph, airily; 'I thought perhaps you'd be at home. It's the first day this fellow's pill has given him leave to go out. I found him just starting to call here when I got to his diggings, so I came back along with him, you see.'

'I'm glad to see you so much better, Sir Charles,' said Imogen; 'I hope you'll soon be altogether out of the doctor's hands.'

She tried hard to master her confusion so as to appear exactly the same as usual, and had an internal conviction that her attempt was a signal failure—which naturally only increased her discomposure. That there was anything wrong about her passed unnoticed by Ralph, but was immediately apparent to the finer perceptions of a lover. Sir Charles knew that there was a change in her voice and manner, and felt somehow puzzled to account for the novelty. What did it mean? Was it

stiffness? Could he have displeased her in any way? What was it?

'Thanks for your good wishes,' he replied. 'I've no doubt that I shall pick up in no time, now that I may go out again. Fresh air always agrees with me better than anything else, and I find I don't get on at all well without it.'

'No more do I,' she answered. 'Unluckily it's an article that's decidedly scarce in London. It's one of the few things that no shop keeps in stock, or undertakes to be able to supply you with by the day after to-morrow at latest—as they do in respect to almost every other thing one can possibly require. I suppose you'll go to get it in the country somewhere, or by the sea, now that you can move.'

There was a mingling of sweet and sour in this speech as it seemed to Sir Charles. On the one hand it was satisfactory that she should take an interest in his well-being; but then again he did not at all

admire this prompt suggestion that he ought to go away where he would be out of her reach—especially just now on this first occasion of meeting after such an immense time, no less than a whole ten days having elapsed since he had last seen her!

Here Ralph interposed with a bit of news that he had picked up and was anxious to impart to his sister.

'I say, Im,' he said; 'there's a new wedding just given out. Guess who the parties are that mean to get spliced?'

'Guess? Not I!' she returned. 'What's the good of wearing out my brains with trying to guess something that you can tell me all the time? Who is it?'

'Well, I'll tell you the lady's name, and you must find out the gentleman's for yourself,' he replied; 'it's Lady Elise Bolyn.'

'And is the other, young Mr Crœsus-Hogg?' asked she.

'The very thing itself,' answered Ralph.

'Perhaps she thought herself bound in

common gratitude to accept him after his getting her safe away from the fire; or perhaps she admired little Guelph; or perhaps she admired little Guelph's money; who knows? At any rate they've fixed it up; and the old Hoggs are quite enchanted, and inclined to think that the acquisition of such a daughter-in-law is ample consolation for the burning of any number of mansions. What a thing it is to be rich! They say those Hoggs think no more of the loss of their magnificent house with all the splendid pictures, furniture, plate, statues, and etceteras, than anyone else would of losing an old carpet-bag.'

Ralph was in a conversational humour, and went on cheerfully retailing and commenting on whatever gossip he had heard, without suspecting how greatly Sir Charles would at that moment have preferred his room to his company. Meanwhile the baronet was trying to find some pretext to get rid of the loquacious youth, or in some

way or other to secure a private interview with Imogen. Presently a bright idea occurred to him.

'Miss Rhys,' he said, 'I have a great fancy to look at those two moths I sent you. Will you think me very troublesome if I ask to have my whim gratified?'

Imogen blushed. She felt rather shy on the subject of those moths now that she had discovered the tender sentiments that had been developing unsuspected within her, and led her to set store on a worthless gift merely for the sake of the donor. As for Ralph, he entertained no doubt whatever that the insects had been thrown away long ago, but thought that she probably would not like to say so to Sir Charles, and therefore was annoyed at the baronet for requesting to see them.

'Deuced stupid of him, after I'd told him what rubbish they were, and how she laughed at them when they came,' grumbled Ralph to himself. 'I didn't think he was

so tactless—of course it puts her regularly up a tree.

'Oh no!' replied Imogen readily, in answer to the baronet's request. 'They're in a drawer in the little boudoir on the back stairs. I'll bring them to you directly.'

Ralph stared in astonishment, for it never entered his head that the moths in question could really be there. Yet she spoke with the utmost confidence. Certainly he had not thought she could lie so like truth as that—however, she was blushing pretty considerably he could see. What did she mean to do? for after what she had just said, she was of course bound to produce two moths of some kind or other for the baronet's inspection. It would have been easy enough to arrange the thing if she had had her entomological cabinet in reach, for then she could have fetched out a couple of old specimens of *Thyatira Batis* to be looked at. But he knew that the

collection of moths had been left at home, so she certainly couldn't get out of the difficulty in that way. Would she trust to the chance of Sir Charles' not remembering what the moths he had sent were like? and show him a couple of some other kind, and try and palm them off upon him as being the same?

Imogen's answer was just what Sir Charles had hoped for, as affording an excuse for him and her to go into another room alone together.

'I couldn't think of troubling you to bring them here,' he replied, 'but I should like extremely to go and see them in the boudoir, if you'll take me there.'

He was, however, mistaken in thinking that he would thus get rid of Ralph's presence; for that youth was becoming very curious as to what his sister would exhibit as Sir Charles' *Thyatira Batis*, and had not the remotest intention of being left behind. Sir Charles looked implor-

ingly, meaningly, at him, as he rose to accompany them; but the look passed unnoticed. Sir Charles took advantage of Ralph's being a few yards behind them as they went out of the room, to affect not to perceive his intention of coming, and shut the door in his face. Then when Ralph pushed it open and followed them, the baronet exclaimed,—

'Hullo, old fellow! what on earth makes *you* want to see these moths?' with an air of surprise so exaggerated that it might really have given Ralph a hint to stay behind. But all such hints were completely thrown away upon him, for he never noticed Sir Charles' behaviour at all, being too much occupied with wondering how his sister intended to extricate herself from the scrape in which she had, as he believed, got entangled. Never once did the possibility of her having kept the insects occur to him, till she opened the moth-

box, and he saw within it a couple of ill-set, unmistakable *Thyatira Batis.*

Glancing at her in utter amazement, he was struck by an unusual look on her face, which seemed to express embarrassment and softness, mingled in a way that he had never before seen there. Sir Charles, too, was looking at him strangely, he thought; and then all of a sudden, there began to dawn upon him a perception that he was perhaps in the way.

Sir Charles, meanwhile, who recollected Imogen's interest in Richard Richards, and her anxiety for his innocence to be proved, was asking whether he and his family had yet left their home, as they had been going to do, or whether the certainty of his innocence had come in time to prevent the move.

'Yes, it was just in time,' answered Imogen; 'they were to have gone next week, but now they can stay on where they are, and Richard has been taken on

at work by someone directly—people seem to feel that they are bound to do something to make up for their past unjust suspicions, and I hear that a subscription is to be got up for him. Ann—his wife, you know—must have been delighted to be able to stay, for she couldn't bear the idea of leaving home. However, she didn't indulge in any very extravagant demonstrations of joy on the occasion, for when she heard that her husband was cleared from the charge against him, I'm told that she only gave a sort of grunt, and remarked,—"Well; and there's fullish people was to be so long finding that out. *I* was know it all along." What a strange, sad business this has been about the burglary.'

'Yes, indeed,' he answered. 'Whatever Sylvester may have been, he behaved nobly the other night and saved us at his own risk. There would have been a poor chance for our lives then, if it hadn't been for him. And when I think how he helped

to carry me out of that horrible place where I lay insensible, it seems perfectly odious to have to consider him as a thief. I feel as if I wanted to knock down anyone who ventures to suggest such a thing. I knew very little of him; but it's my firm impression that he must have been a fine fellow in some ways, at all events.'

Ralph had relieved them of his company a few minutes previously upon the pretence of a note which he declared himself to have suddenly remembered an immediate necessity for writing and despatching. Sir Charles and Imogen were consequently alone together, and the mention of Sylvester's name might seem to lead naturally to her confiding to the baronet that history of the relations between herself and Sylvester that had troubled her so greatly a short time ago. It had then seemed to her most desirable to have a confidant for her troubles; and now here she was, alone with the very person who had appeared to

her as an ideally perfect confidant. She did not, however, avail herself of the opportunity, which was to be accounted for by a sudden shyness of her companion that had come over her in the last half-hour or so. Instead of continuing, as might have been expected, to speak about Sylvester, she rather nervously suggested that they should return to the drawing-room. But the young man meant to have his say first, and plunged into it boldly.

'Wait one moment first, please,' he said. 'I want to repeat a question, Imogen, that I asked you once before. Perhaps you will think me a mere vain fool for troubling you a second time with it—but—but—somehow I have dared to fancy that if I tried again I might possibly get a different answer from what I did before; and the prize I hope for is too precious to risk losing for want of a word. I sent you a couple of moths and you did not reject them even though they were but common

and worthless. May I meet with the same good fortune as they did? May I, too, not be rejected, even though I have no special merits to recommend me in your eyes?'

Her face was turned downwards, and her cheeks were crimson. Extreme nervousness and many conflicting emotions made her feel awkward, and she did not immediately reply. She felt half uncomfortable even notwithstanding a new sensation of gladness that was creeping over her. Suddenly she looked up at him with eyes shining with the strange, deep, hitherto unknown emotion that filled her; there was, too, upon her face a half-saucy smile that seemed a sort of final effort against yielding to that sentimentality of being in love which she had so often laughed at.

'Ah, well!' she said; 'I suppose it would be hardly fair to treat you worse than I did your moths. And after all, you are better than them in one way—for while

there are lots of *Thyatira Batis* in the world, you know there's only one YOU. But oh, dear, just to think how Ralph will crow over me when he hears of it!'

THE END.

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